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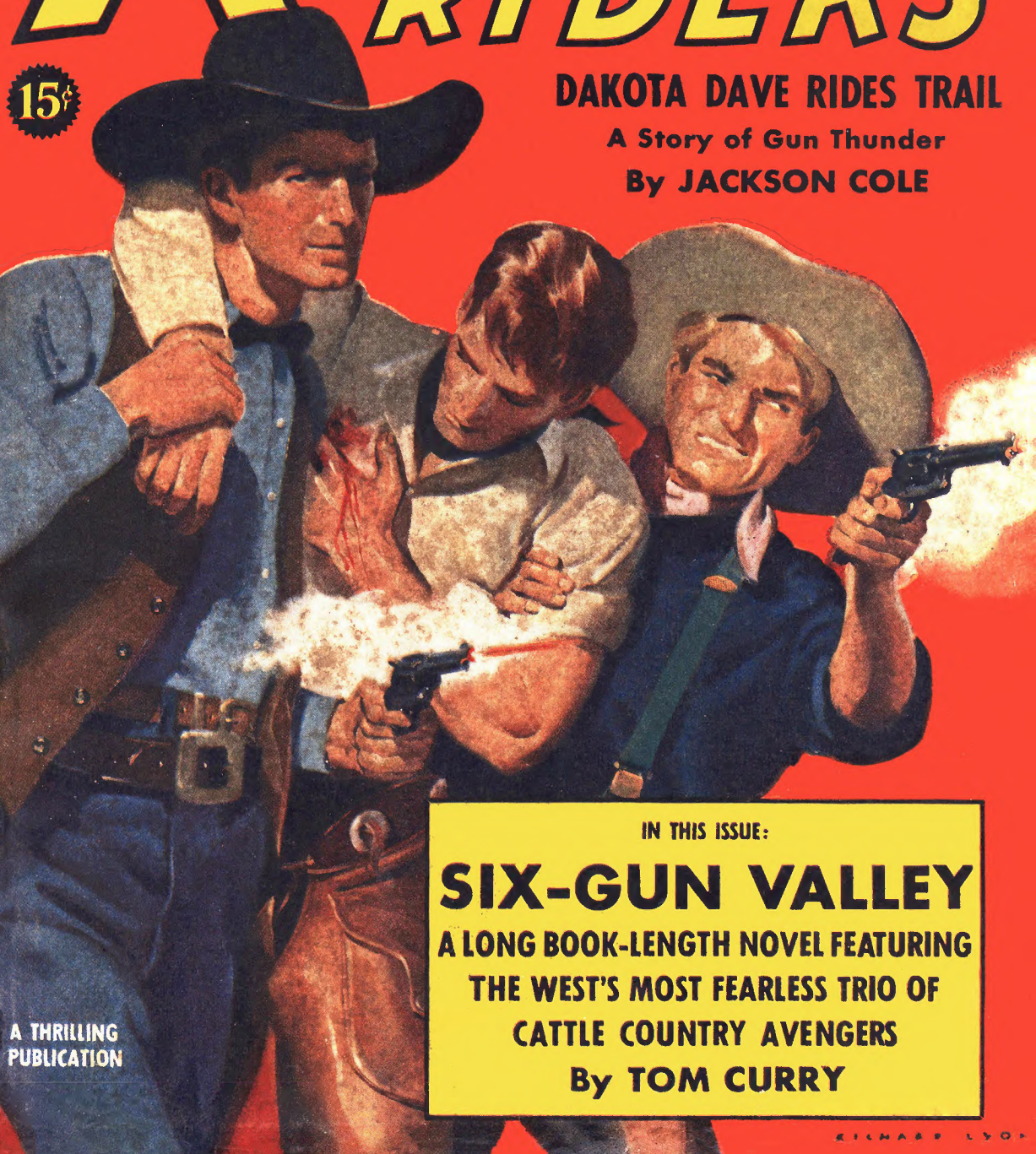

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SIX-GUN VALLEY

A LONG BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL FEATURING THE WEST'S MOST FEARLESS TRIO OF CATTLE COUNTRY AVENGERS

By TOM CURRY

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RANGE RIDERS

Vol. 4, No. 1 CONTENTS April, 1939

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By TOM CURRY

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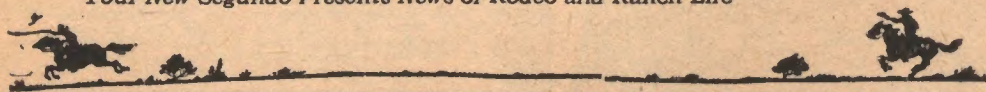

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25	.85	34	1.09	43	1.51	52	2.27
26	.87	35	1.13	44	1.57	53	2.39
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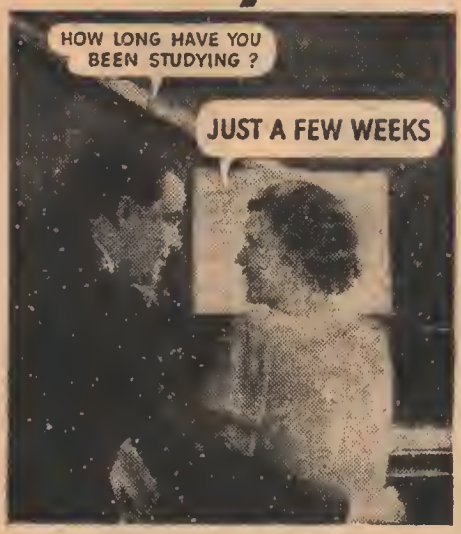

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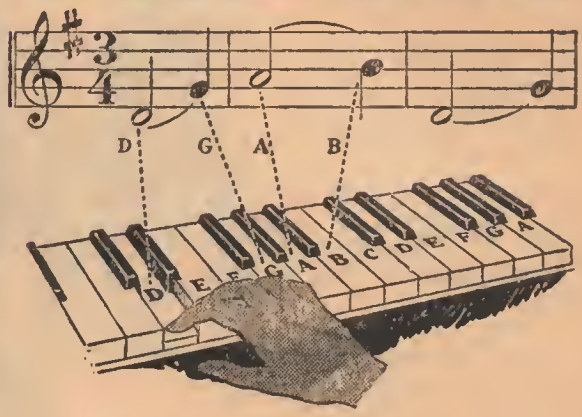

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VOL. 4, NO. 1 RANGE RIDERS APRIL, 1939

SIX-GUN VALLEY

Reese's .38 swung a short arc, spat a stream of livid fire (Chap. II)

The West's Most Fearless Trio of Cattle Country Detectives Battle to Root Out the Destroyers of a Range Paradise!

By TOM CURRY

Author of "Desert Interlude," "Murderers Hang," etc.

CHAPTER I

Murder on the Trail

TWO riders pushed their horses along the rising, rocky trail. The sun was no longer visible behind the ridges of the far-off mountains to their left, but its blood-red rays, canting into the sky, suffused the entire dome with a scarlet splendor that filled the heart of one of the horsemen with wonder.

"It's a beautiful country," he exclaimed. "How could Death ever come into it?"

The swinish-looking hombre who accompanied him was evidently less appreciative of or else more accustomed to Western sunsets, for he growled an ill-humored curse.

"Wait right here, mister," he said,

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

"and enjoy the scenery. I'll hustle on ahaid a piece and make shore the way's clear."

"Sure," the sunset appreciator agreed with alacrity. He was glad to pause, to look around at the white blooms of the mesquite, the purple-and-green prickly pears. He drank in the aromatic odor of the chaparral.

And the Death he could not believe was present—the Death he could not associate with this quiet land beneath the sunset glow—struck!

He never knew what hit him. The lead slug entered the thin bone of his temple an inch behind the eye, drilled his brain! Before even the report of the cracking rifle could register, he had collapsed in a limp, lifeless heap on the trail.

His horse jumped nervously as the hills played ball with the sound of the shot. But its reins had fallen to the ground and, being thus ground-hitched though unintentionally, it did not bolt. It was peacefully cropping a tuft of grass when a band of grim-faced men galloped up, closing in from the fan formation they had used in dogging their unsuspecting prey.

Reese whipped the gun into reverse—the Colt belched death (Chap. V)

One of the horsemen, a giant in black chaps, with a three-day stubble of beard intensifying the ferocity of his jutting jaw, slid from his black stallion and bent over the dead man. He rolled the victim over.

"Swell shot, Chief," he growled. "Yuh drilled his thinker. Reckon he

didn't even hear the shot."

"Never mind the molasses, Dugan," snapped the Chief. "See what he's got on him. Then bury him under that rock slide where the coyotes can't dig him out. Pronto. We want to get goin' before anybody comes along."

The acrid odor of fresh blood—blood of spattered brains—was in the nostrils of the man addressed as "Chief." His nostrils flared as a wild beast's might at such a scent. But he turned away to examine the pack tied at the ground-hitched gelding's cantle.

The swinish-looking man—the erstwhile guide—came riding back to join them.

"I put him right where yuh wanted him, didn't I, Chief?" he asked. "It was a cinch."

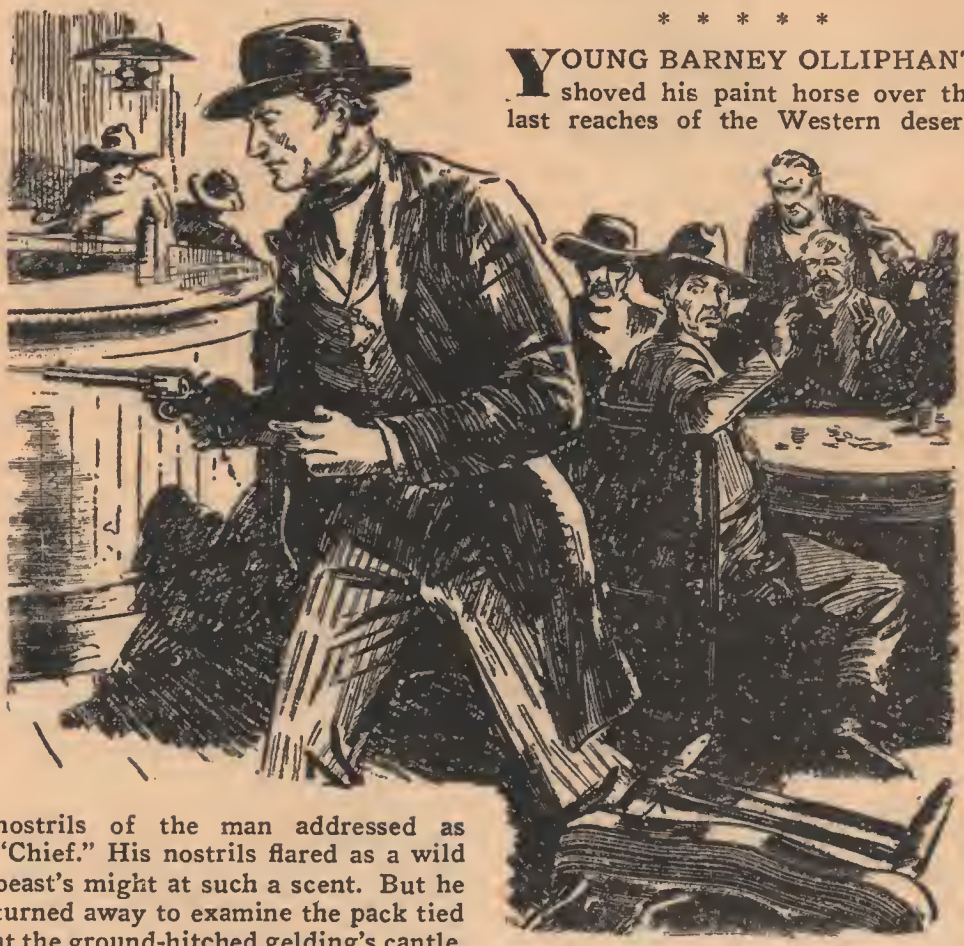
The Chief made no answer.

Dugan straightened from his search through the dead man's pockets and held out something to the Chief. "Think this'll be okay, Morgan?" he asked.

"It will be, one way or another," promised the Chief.

His eyes held an evil, terrible glow.

* * * * *



YOUNG BARNEY OLLIPHANT shoved his paint horse over the last reaches of the Western desert, toward the Lane River Valley. He was headed east, had come across the northern fringe of arid land from the northwest country where he had been working a line camp for a big Eastern syndicate. Hence he had been out of

touch with things for a couple of months—and it was two years since he had visited the lovely sections watered by the Lane River and its tributary brooks.

Memory had brought Olliphant back here, a memory of the quiet, happy valley set apart from the worry and bustle of the world, where the ranchers helped one another, where life slid peacefully along, blessed by good water and herbage and overseen by the beneficence of Judge Samuel Bowie Lane, owner of the large Diamond L outfit which was situated in the middle sections of the Lane Valley.

Barney Olliphant was a large young fellow, with broad, powerful shoulders on him; his light hair was inclined to curl at the ends so he kept it cut short. Life in the open had tanned his face to the hue of smooth leather. He had a way with horses, and his voice, save in rare moments when he grew angry, was low and gentle. Six-guns rode his tight-sheathed hips; but he was not a gun-fighter. He was inclined, rather, to the use of his heavy and efficient fists, unless forced to shoot.

Barney raised his eyes; they were touched by myriad tiny sun wrinkles from squinting in the brilliant distances of the West, hunting runaway stock. He was nearing the fertile range which he remembered from two years back when he had been riding the Diamond L string.

"Funny," he muttered to his paint horse. "Looks like nobody's around! Only one smoke sign in the hull valley."

In the eastern distance he made out the faint, bluish crawl of a smoke column in the bright, painted sky.

The Lane River, emptying out of the magic emerald valley, so strikingly lovely in surroundings of sered brown wastes, dropped out of the valley from a narrow gorge, over a steep slide, and roared, white-foamed, into a great black hole in the rocks. It ran underground, to be seen no more until it gushed up many miles west, to flow into the northern Rio Grande.

To the west, to the south, for mile on mile, stretched the arid spaces of the desert—useless land with a bronze haze always hanging over it, supporting only rocks and the hardiest of cactus growths.

By the time Barney Olliphant reached the end of the rocky rise and cut through the narrow gap into the Lane Valley itself, the dust, kicked up in clouds by the hot winds blowing over the desert, lay thick upon him and upon his sweated paint horse.

The noise of the river was now loud in his ears as it ran through the rocks and down the falls.

"Whoa," he exclaimed suddenly, and the horse was glad to pause for a rest. But it was not for rest that Barney Olliphant had paused.

TO his left lay several skeletons, picked by coyotes and buzzards, whitened in the hot sun.

"Daid steers," he muttered. "Grass seems to have died 'round 'em." He eyed the brown patch, fifty feet wide, near the bones. He was puzzled.

He rode on, following the trail that had once been kept freshly beaten by animals and by the men who herded them. It was now growing rank with weeds. His seeking eyes saw none of the fat steers his memory had envisioned. To his right, not far from the river trail, he noted a ranch house built of forest wood. It was deserted. He rode over to it, to stare with growing perplexity at a half a dozen piles of stones that were about six feet long and a yard broad.

It wasn't that he didn't know what they were. "Graves," he grunted. They were, he well knew, the cairns placed over human burial spots to keep the coyotes from digging up the corpses.

Anxiety had by this time crept into his heart. His blue eyes had turned chill and bleak. He rode on. The once magnificent, teeming valley was no longer so. All about him were the

signs of death and desolation. A soundlessness, a stillness. What did it mean? What had happened?

He had to find out. It was not for this that Barney Olliphant had come back. He had come back because of a memory—a memory of a beautiful land and a beautiful face — the face of a girl.

Two years ago he had run away from such things. But at that time he had thought he must be footloose and fancy free. He was just a cowpuncher, he had thought then—he had held no exaggerated opinion of his worth.

He shoved on up the great valley, his dread growing. He observed more and more skeletons, of cattle and of horses—and, diverging now and again to look over a house, with its bunkhouse and corrals and outbuildings built near the river water, he saw more human graves, some with carved headboards.

He read an inscription: "DANIEL YOUNG. KILLED BY THE DEATH AUG. 3rd." There were several like that.

"What death?" he muttered aloud.

Here and there were those strange dead patches where the vegetation had withered.

The smoke column to the east was now plainer.

"God," Barney thought, "if the Diamond L—"

He left his thought unfinished as the big Diamond L spread came into view. The buildings were all there — long, shaded ranch house, trees planted in a lane reaching down to the river where was built a stone springhouse in which to store food to be kept cool.

The one-storied, white-painted house nestled in the cozy hillside; the corrals, the big hay barns and stables on the flat, all looked very peaceful, as though left for but a short time, the owners soon to return to reanimate the scene.

But closer, as he skirted skeletons of perished steers, Barney saw a large new graveyard behind the bunkhouse. A coyote, suddenly darting out of the barn and slinking away into the bushes, startled him.

"Dang my hide if I kin make it out," he growled.

The only sign of human life in the whole valley was that smoke, to the east. . . .

OR was it? As he swung round toward the south flank of the ranch he saw a rider on the valley rim, and his keen, trained eyes told him it was a woman.

"Well, at least thar's somethin' around here that ain't daid," he growled.

With a hoarse halloa he spurred his paint horse up the slope to meet her. She halted, waiting for him, and as he neared her his heart gave a leap.

Yes, it was she, the girl the memory of whom had drawn him back to the Valley. And he felt his heart constrict as he saw she had been crying.

"I thought you were Will Richards, till you got close," she said.

But Barney knew that she did not know him. After all, he had never seen her in the months he had worked the Diamond L; she had been at school in Chicago for three years. The light in his eyes surprised her and she asked,

"You know who I am?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Lane. I worked for yore dad two years back."

"But—I wasn't here then. I don't remember you."

"That's right. But—I seen yore picture, ma'am." Barney couldn't stop the brick-red flush and she did not miss it.

In the flesh she was even more lovely than he had imagined, with soft dark hair and brown eyes; her dainty figure was erect in the saddle, and she was, like most Western-bred girls, an expert rider.

To cover his confusion Barney asked quickly, "What's gone wrong with the Valley, Miss Lane? When I was here last, things were boomin' and

everybody was happy. Now—why, it seems like everything's died. An' you —you've been cryin'—"

He saw that she was close to tears again. Maybe he shouldn't have said anything, he thought. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he stammered. "I reckon I talk too much."

She shook her head. "It's—it's not your fault. I can understand how puzzled you must be. I try not to cry. But when I look at our beautiful home, and think of the horror of the past months, I usually can't help it. There were four hundred people living here."

He nodded. "Yes ma'am. I know."

"Then I suppose you know too that my father, Judge Lane, brought most of them to the Valley, and he feels responsible for them and for what's happened. The cattle were dying, too, and we had to drive them out of the range."

"Where yuh-all livin' at now?"

"We've built temporary quarters twenty miles south, across the ridges. It's poor land, not good enough pasture, and the water's alkaline. Now and then I ride up to look at the Valley. I suppose it's foolish of me to come here, it only upsets me."

"What's caused all this?" he asked.

"Nobody knows. When people began to die, many in agony, we got panic-stricken and pulled up stakes."

BARNEY waved to the east, and she turned her grave eyes to follow his big hand. "Who's livin' up there?"

"That's a scientist Father sent for, from the East. Dad hopes he can find out what's gone wrong with our land, what has killed so many people and creatures. Why, even the grass died in patches, as you can see. Father feels awful about it. But he lost his brother, my uncle; and a dozen of our men, good friends."

She turned her face from the Valley of Death. "It hurts me," she murmured, "but I love the Valley so, it keeps drawing me back. I can't believe it could be so cruel."

A hail startled them. They turned to see a man walking toward them. He wore khaki, an Easterner's outfit, and a brown felt hat on his brown-haired head. His eyes blinked mildly behind thick lenses and he wore a short goatee which, like the edges of his temples, was tinged with grey.

"How do you do, Miss Lane?" he called politely, waving a long hand; it was stained with yellow splotches.

"Hello, Dr. Prentiss," June Lane replied, and asked eagerly: "Have you had any luck?"

He smiled gently, shook his head. "I'm just getting started in my investigation," he told her. "I've had to collect specimens for analysis, you see. Some of the processes take several days. And I've had a touch of sickness; it may be poisoning. Luckily I had some eggs and emetics with me or it might have been serious."

He looked inquiringly at young Barney Olliphant. "This is Dr. Charles Prentiss," June Lane told him, "the scientist who's trying to find out what's gone wrong with the Valley, Mister —" She stopped, a tinge of color in her cheeks.

"Barney Olliphant, ma'am."

Prentiss stuck out his hand, stained with chemicals. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Olliphant. They've been having a hard time of it, the Lane people. I take it you're a stranger hereabouts, since Miss Lane doesn't know you? She's acquainted with everybody."

His even teeth gleamed behind his beard; he was, Barney thought, very good-natured, kind.

"Yes, sir. Just rode in from the north. But I used to work for the Diamond L, couple of years back."

June swung her white horse to face south. "We'd best be riding. It'll be supper time before we get in and father will be worried. You'll come to eat, both of you, won't you?"

"Thanks," Barney said gratefully, and Prentiss nodded.

"I need some fresh sulphuric acid," the scientist said. "I accidentally smashed the container I had of it. And I want to have a word with your father, Miss Lane."

The two men, one at either side of the girl, swung their horses south. A dirt trail led down the hillside away from the Valley of Death.

THE ride didn't seem long to Olliphant; he couldn't take his eyes off June Lane. He hardly heard what Charles Prentiss said; the man talked about the Valley chiefly and the scientific problem it presented.

Too quickly — for Barney — they covered the miles between the Valley and the temporary camp built by the Lane people. The sun was near setting when they got there. Campfires were going.

An oldster in blue pants and shirt, tobacco tag hanging from an open vest pocket, his massive, leonine head crowned with thick white hair, a commanding figure among the bustling hundreds in the settlement, stepped over and sang out a greeting to June.

"Why, howdy, Dr. Prentiss," he cried. "Yuh got any news for me?"

Prentiss's teeth shone as he smiled behind his goatee. "Nothing important yet, Judge Lane. I am working hard, however. It's rather difficult doing research in such a place, you know, without laboratory facilities."

"Yuh think yuh'll be able to clear it up?" asked Lane. There was tremendous eagerness in his voice although he repressed it as much as he could; anxious-faced ranchers gathered around the two.

"I'll try, though I can't say I hold out much hope, Judge. There may be a poisonous growth of fungi that sends its spores into the air. That, of course, could be destroyed when found.

"On the other hand it may be a mineral vein that's been opened up by some natural phenomenon such as an

Steve Reese

earthquake. At any rate, it'll take some time to find the cause, and then we may be able to judge what remedy, if any, there is.

"I had to ride over because my only bottle of sulphuric acid broke and I must have more in order to get on with my experiments. Here's an express receipt. I wish you'd have someone ride to Carville to pick up the package for me. It's a box of chemicals I arranged to have shipped out to me."

"I'll start a man out right away," Lane promised. "Make yoreself comfortable, Doctor. We'll shake yuh up some grub in a jiffy. June 'll take keer of yuh—who's this young feller, June?"

"You remember me, Jedge?" Barney said, taking off his Stetson so that Lane could see him more clearly. "I rode for yuh coupla years back. Name's Barney Olliphant."

"I recollect. Yuh got the itchin' foot and quit. Glad to see yuh, Barney. Have some grub."

Lane slapped the young giant on the back.

"I've seen the Valley, Jedge," Bar-

ney said. "If there's anything I kin do, I'll be glad to help."

"There ain't much, but stick around," Lane told him. He called over a cowboy, gave him quick orders to ride to Carville to the south, which was on the railroad, and pick up Prentiss's package.

Then he led Dr. Prentiss into the rudely built shack which was his home now. It was a lot different, thought Barney, from the huge, rambling ranch house, so well furnished, which stood in the grim Valley of Death.

A SWINISH looking man, with a sour look on his face and a cast in one eye, came up and went inside. A number of the Lane Valley ranchers were circulating about, anxious to know what Dr. Prentiss had to say about their beloved home.

There was cooking going on in Lane's kitchen lean-to; a Chinese cook flitted to and fro. Now and then a man would drift in to sniff at the meal or to get himself a drink. The life was free and easy; the Judge kept open house.

Supper was about ready. Ah Wong, the Lane's cook for many years, came toward the Judge. He was carrying Lane's plate of food. The Judge was seated by the fire talking with Dr. Prentiss.

The Chinaman had a strange look on his wizened face. His almond eyes bulged and he kept licking his pale lips.

"Me try—" he gasped, and then collapsed on the dirt floor at the Judge's feet, the plate smashing, food spilling all over the place.

"Why, what the hell—" growled Lane, leaping up.

Dr. Prentiss quickly knelt beside Ah Wong. "He's dead," he gasped, after feeling the Chinaman's lifeless pulse.

A rancher cursed. "It's the Death," he cried bitterly. "It's follered us here!"

CHAPTER II

Drygulcher Bullets

STEVE REESE, investigator for the Cattlemen's Protective Association, rode his hired horse north toward the spot where the bartender in the Carville saloon had told him he might find Judge Samuel Bowie Lane. Carville was on the railroad, some miles to the south, and Reese had arrived on a hurry call, from Dallas.

Tall and distinguished, in his early 'thirties, Reese wore Eastern clothes, a neat black suit, with white shirt and black string tie. His dark eyes were softly luminous but there was a penetrating glow to them, and efficiency was written all over him.

He looked like a tenderfoot—yet Steve Reese was the chief of the Association's range detectives, engaged for the remarkable qualities he possessed. Though not a native of the West, Reese was a first-class horseman, a skillful boxer, and could handle a gun with the best of men, though no gun was visible on him.

In his swift trip from Dallas, headquarters of the C.P.A., to the far-off stretches of Texas across the Pecos, he was answering the distress call of Judge Lane, a member of the Association. Most of the Lane Valley ranchers belonged to the group, which offered protection of every sort to its members. Some had insurance claims to be paid for dead cattle; many men had died in the Valley, and stock, too. From what Reese had been told at headquarters, some strange mystery had gripped the whole section, a mystery he must try to solve by his clever brain.

Under his Eastern hat his temples

showed slightly greyed. A careless glance would mark "Doc" Reese as a harmless tenderfoot.

The dark eyes, on the trail he followed, grew interested. Casually he had been watching the sign left by four horsemen not far ahead of him. He looked up now; someone was coming toward him.

A cowboy swung into view around the turn of the heavily bushed trail to the camp of the Lane Valley people. Reese briefly noted the flank of the waddy's brown mustang on which was branded a diamond with an L inside it.

"Howdy, mister," the cowboy greeted him, taking in the get-up and mentally ticketing Reese as a tenderfoot from the East. "Ain't yuh out sorta late?"

It was close to sundown.

"Good evening," said Reese in his deep, cultured baritone, taking no notice of the implication that he was not able to take care of himself after dark. "I'm on my way to Judge Lane's quarters. Am I on the right road?"

"Why, shore yuh are. I come from there, I ride for the jedge. Just keep on this trail as yuh're haided, and yuh'll be there in half an hour. I gotta hustle to town on an errand."

He raised a hearty hand, and, giving Reese the road, skirted the detective and galloped his horse on south for Carville.

STEVE REESE pressed on. By training and instinct his eyes were on the trail ahead; for, despite his tenderfoot appearance, he was a star manhunter, a man who was the nightmare of rustlers from Montana to the Mexican border. As such he would have been helpless unless he knew how to read sign; a good tracker always watches a trail he is on, from habit, and it tells the expert as much as the reading of a printed page.

He was doing it now, and his dark eyes keened up as though lighted by an inner lantern.

Dusty Trail

He had reached a point about a quarter mile from where he had met the Diamond L waddy. And the trail of the still invisible four ahead of him swung out, off the track, into the bushes. There wasn't much light left but enough for him to see the bent twigs of the mesquite to the right, where the quartet had quickly pushed back out of sight of the trail.

"Now why should they have hidden from that waddy?" Reese muttered.

A little farther on he found the spot where the four had broken from the thorny bush back to the marked trail.

It was such precision, such observance of tiny details, that helped make Steve Reese the West's greatest range detective. His keen brain answered its own question: "They could only have hidden because they didn't wish to be seen near Lane's camp!"

They might be common outlaws; the chances were they would have been recognized by Lane's waddy; and they had come from Carville, Reese knew, since he had picked up their sign right outside of the town.

So he was cautious how he pro-

ceeded from that point on. There might be a harmless explanation for the actions of the four ahead, men he had not even seen; on the other hand, only a fool neglected warnings.

The night was falling, a vast velvet blanket, over the Pecos land; the aromatic scent of creosote and sage in his nostrils, Doc Reese saw ahead the flickering fires and yellow lanterns of a big camp. The dim shapes of buildings, rough shacks most of them, showed in the area of the light.

Doc Reese dismounted, left his weary plug well outside, and proceeded, a silent wraith, on foot toward the spot. These huts, he realized, were the temporary quarters of the distressed Lane Valley citizens, under the leadership of Judge Samuel Bowie Lane.

It was suppertime. He could sniff the fried beef and coffee on the cooling air, as he slowly approached, hunting for the four hombres, whose presence he sensed.

They must have stopped here—there was no other place, so he understood from directions given him in town, to go, unless on to the Valley of Death, which most men shunned now.

HE paused, lurking in the dark of the mesquite, the white, waxy blooms looking like stars in the night. He could see there were tents up, and rough shelters, and there were families eating their meal together in group. Smoke hung in the air; the light circle covered an area large as a village. In the central background a bigger shack, of raw-cut timber and brush, took his eye.

He went on, circling through the thorny bushes. And his quick eyes caught the gleam of light on metal. It came from the east side of the large shack. As he tensed, staring that way, he saw a Stetson-covered head, then the hunched shoulders of a burly man who raised a rifle to aim at the window from which the light shaft came.

The action broke with the suddenness of a bursting shell. As Steve Reese bounded forward, he almost stepped on a man crouched in the bush just outside the clearing. The hombre's startled curses as Reese came upon him were answered by a gruff voice a few yards farther on.

"What's wrong, Martie—keep quiet, yuh fool!"

The command was fierce, a leader's order.

"Look out—watch it," hissed Martie, close to Reese. "Somebuddy's here—"

He dug for his gun. Reese, eyes darting back to the drygulcher at the big shack, saw the steady rifle aimed for the window; the killer was taking direct aim at someone inside. . . .

Reese's right hand brushed the lapel of his frock coat; a slender-barreled .38 flashed into sight, swung in a short arc, spat a stream of livid fire.

It was a quick shot, a forced shot; only an expert could have made it good. It was a bullet to stop that sneaking murderer beyond, and it did its work; the rifle roared but its barrel jerked up as Reese's slug nicked through the shoulder against which the butt was pressed. The man let out a screech of anguish, rolled out of the light.

The man called Martie fired point-blank, but Reese was dropping down, and the .38 of the range detective spoke again even as he fell backward on his shoulders. Martie yipped in pain, grabbed at his smashed hip.

"This way," choked Martie, appealing to the others for help. He staggered back through the mesquite even as Reese, sinewy body recovering balance, rolled up to his knees.

There was a pile of jagged rock near at hand, and Reese quickly put it between himself and the oncoming gunmen.

The other two had the horses. Martie met them, and a stream of leaden death roared from the bush toward the spot where Reese had crouched a

moment before. Bullets spanged in the leaves, into the dirt, against the protecting rock.

Martie was groaning. The shooting drew the ranchers from their supper; a few ran toward the spot, those nearest reaching the bushes.

The drygulchers dared not pursue Reese farther, without running into the ranchers; they sent a burst of bullets toward the ranchers, framed against the firelight, and one of the ranchers clutched at his head and fell dead.

IT stopped the ranchers' advance; the few out ahead waited for the main bunch to gather and come up, yelling to them. This gave the killers their chance to leap in their saddles and they rode north, circling the camp, evidently to pick up the hombre Reese had winged at the shack window.

Reese rose up, started to follow after them. The Lane Valley men, bunched together, were now running toward the spot from which the shooting had flared. They saw Reese's dark figure against the lighter sky, and bullets sang about him.

"Stop, there, yuh dirty drygulcher," a stentorian voice bellowed.

CHAPTER III

"Lynch Him!"

DON'T shoot me, gentlemen," called Reese calmly. "You've got hold of the wrong man. The real killers are riding off in the other direction."

But of course they didn't believe him. Burning brands had been snatched up from campfires and carried as torches. The ranchers, faces lined grim with despair and anguish at the ruin of their lives, the death of relatives and comrades, quickly surrounded Reese. The gathering bristled with rifles and six-shooters, covering the tall figure of the detective.

In the eerie red glow of the torches, a heavy-bellied hombre with a cast in one black eye, sour of face, black beard stubble on his sallow cheeks, took the lead. He stared down at Reese. His clothes were filthy, stained with sweat and dirt. Untidy, wiry black hair that looked as though it had never been brushed, stuck out from his bear-like head. He had thick, sullen lips, open to show tobacco-stained, broken fangs.

The sight of Reese, sitting there on the ground, seemed to drive him to insane fury. A flush of rage darkened his dirty cheeks, and with a sharp yelp he kicked furiously at the detective, getting him in the arm with his stubby boot toe.

"Drop that gun, yuh dirty dawg," he howled. He threw up his six-shooter, and Reese tensed, for he was sure the man meant to kill him then and there.

But there were saner heads in the crowd; two men quickly seized the dirty hombre by his arms, dragged him back.

"Take it easy, Richards," advised one.

Reese thought it best to let his slim .38 fall to the earth, and one of the ranchers picked it up. The range detective rose, brushing the dirt off his dark clothes.

"Why, he's a durned dude," exclaimed one in amazement.

"While you've gone to such trouble to capture me, my friends," began Reese, "you have allowed the real drygulchers to escape."

"Huh? Dunno 'bout that." Rough hands gripped Reese, and the man called Richards, struggling to break loose from restraining friends, shouted angrily, "Git a rope. String him

up. He tried to kill the Jedge."

There were always quick-tempered citizens in such an excited crowd, ready and willing to take part in a lynching-bee and find out later they had been wrong about the victim strung up. Richards seemed especially vindictive toward Reese.

The Cattlemen's detective was somewhat shaken up; in the hubbub of voices he had difficulty in making himself heard.

"Take me to Judge Lane," he snapped.

"He's in cahoots with 'em," shrieked Richards. "He shot down pore Burt Young, boys."

One of his pals began to shake out a lariat, fixing the noose meaningly. "We got plenty trouble, gents, without lettin' this sorta thing go on," growled the roper. "Let's teach folks once and for all not to come sneakin' up on our camp."

BULLETS had killed one of their friends, and rough-and-ready vigilantes, always to be found in a Western crowd, thirsted for quick vengeance.

"You're making a mistake," Reese informed them, but an angry rancher struck him in the mouth.

Richards was released and he leaped at Reese in slathering fury. "I'll do it—gimme that rope," he bawled.

A commanding voice, musical in tone yet forceful enough to make all pause, ordered from the rear: "Here, stop that. What's goin' on?"

"Jedge Lane," growled Richards, "we done caught this bird out in the bushes with his gun in hand. Figger he's in cahoots with whoever tried to shoot yuh just now, and the bullets that kilt pore Burt Young come from these here bushes."

"Bring him to my place," ordered the Judge. He swung, walked back across the clearing toward the large shack.

Rough hands shoved Steve Reese along; Richards took several cuffs at him, cuffs which Reese received calmly, without appearing to notice them. The detective's eyes searched the camp; he saw women and children, and could sense the distress of the people. He did not miss the dazed sobbing of Young's widow, who had flung herself on the still-warm body of her husband.

"Fetch him inside, boys," ordered Judge Lane, from his doorway.

Reese was shoved in. The shack was built of odds and ends of timber, patched with brush and canvas. Lanterns were hung here and there to light the interior. The inside was divided into four compartments, dirt for the floor, a stone fireplace at one end, and filled with family belongings hauled from the big Lane ranch in the Valley of Death. Cots showed in the small side chambers; there was a kitchen lean-to at the rear.

Judge Samuel Bowie Lane stood with his back to the fire.

Steve Reese stared at the handsome oldster, and by the glint of the slate-colored eyes, the eagle curve of the prominent nose, the long space between nostrils and upper lip, read in Judge Lane a real leader of men.

Ranchers crowded in till there was no room for any more, and the rest formed a knot outside the open door. Steve Reese noted a pretty young woman near Lane; her face registered alarm at her father's narrow escape.

"Caught him sneakin' away through the bushes, Jedge," reported Richards, still angry. "He's a dude but he done shot Burt Young and fired at us all."

Judge Lane took charge with quick efficiency.

"All right, Will. Tim, see if the dude's gun has been fired."

The Judge took Reese in, with a single glance, from the crisp dark hair, silvered at temples, to the Eastern boots on his feet.

THE rancher who held Reese's slender barreled .38 reported,

"Two gone out of his gun, Jedge."

"Of course my pistol's been fired, sir," Reese admitted. "I shot at the men who tried to murder you—at least, I imagine one of them was after you, for it was into that window over there I saw a man stick a rifle." He waved to the opening in the side of the shack.

Judge Lane frowned, and asked, "What's yore story, suh? Where did yuh come from, and why should yuh claim to save my life?"

"So far as my shooting your friend Young, and firing at your friends goes," replied Reese gently, "I didn't. The two shots I let loose were at the assassins who were hidden in the mes-

Hank Ball

quite. And I would prefer to tell you alone, Judge Lane, exactly who I am and why I'm here at your camp."

"Don't yuh do it, Jedge," growled Richards suspiciously. "He's huntin' a chance to escape."

But Judge Lane was the sort of person who made his own decisions. He raised a commanding hand, waved his followers outside.

They left, save the pretty young woman and a powerful young giant with curly light hair who stood there, watching the girl.

June inquired, "You want us to go, too, Dad?"

Judge Lane replied, "Yes, June. Step into the kitchen and wait there with Olliphant."

When the two young people had gone into the rear, the tall, distinguished range detective faced the handsome old judge.

"Well, suh?" demanded Lane softly. "Yuh don't seem at all worried. Many a man, innocent or guilty, would have been scairt just now."

"My name is Reese, Steven Reese," the master manhunter told Judge Lane. "I am from the Cattlemen's Protective Association in Dallas, in reply to your telegraphed appeal."

Lane's eyes widened.

"You needn't take my word for it," Reese went on. "Here's my badge, and credentials."

The badge flashed back the lamplight as Reese extended his hand. "It's best we keep this between us, for a time, until I can have a look around. You may tell anyone who asks that I'm from the C.P.A. simply to check up on how much assistance is necessary."

The Judge mopped his brow. "An' they almost lynched yuh," he said. "Sit down and my daughter 'll serve yuh up food and drink. I regret yore havin' been manhandled so by my friends. But they're in a mighty bad state of mind, yuh see, and apt to fly off the handle. I thank yuh for savin' my life."

The old Judge swung, called, "June honey!" June Lane came from the kitchen, tagged by Barney.

Lane introduced Reese, who bowed gallantly and looked with open admiration at the girl. Olliphant, not used to high society, muttered "Howdy," and waited there awkwardly till June ordered, "Come along, Barney, you can give me a hand."

THE Judge stepped to the open door. He held a whispered confab with the gathered ranchers outside. Oaths of surprise and consternation came to Reese's ears, and the ranchers quickly split up, returning to their family groups.

Lane took a chair close to the range detective, by the fire. "They wish to apologize, suh, for their roughness with yuh."

"That's all right. When men grow excited they're apt to do anything. Now, my main purpose here is to get you and your Valley folk straightened out. I understood there might be some poison involved in your trouble; anyway, that's what these mysterious deaths sounded like at long distance, but I didn't think there would be *lead* poisoning in it! Have you any idea who these men are who tried to kill you tonight? Four rode out from Carville. I wasn't far behind them, and grew suspicious of them when they hid themselves from one of your riders who was heading toward town."

Judge Lane shook his shaggy head. "I ain't got any idea, Reese. I thought folks round here were sorry for us all in our plight. Yuh know we lost thirty people, and many cattle, and we've been forced to leave our home and range. It's mighty hard on the women and young children; they ain't used to it. Most of us had all our money invested in the Lane Valley."

A deep sadness rode the Judge's lined face. He seemed to carry the entire burden of his followers. He continued, "I feel responsible, yuh see, for it all. I encouraged most of these men to come to the Valley to settle. It's—it's like I'd lost my own sons for 'em to die so. I aim, suh, to consecrate my few remainin' years to savin' my friends—if it can be done. What money I have left I'm usin' to that end. I sent for a scientist, Charles Prentiss his name is, at my own expense, to find what's gone wrong with our range. He's workin' on the problem right now; he's outside, if yuh'd like to talk with him. He done rode in from his Valley camp late this afternoon."

"I'll speak to Prentiss shortly," Reese said. "As I understand it, some sort of poison death struck you."

"That's it. Men died in agony, our critters passed out, too; even the grass died in spots. The land went bad on us, folks got skeered and run out. A terrible thing happened 'fore supper tonight. Seems like the Death follered us here. My old Chink cook, Ah Wong, who worked for me since he was a boy, folded up on the floor and died."

Reese listened to the Judge's description. "It sounds," he remarked at the end, "as though he'd been poisoned too, Judge."

"Prentiss and me figgered so, too."

"And no one else was taken sick after eating?"

"Nope."

"H'm. He was carrying your plate of food, you say? And he told you, 'Me try'—why, he must have tasted it. There could have been poison just in your food, isn't that so?"

"Shore, it's possible. Yuh see, it spilled all over the floor so I took a fresh plate."

"Did it seem to you your cook died the way the men in the Valley did?"

"Like some of 'em. It wasn't allus the same. Some died quick, others died slow, in agony, like I told yuh."

"And is there no other place where you could lead them," inquired the detective gently, "so they might start afresh?"

LANE shook his head. "Most land's been staked, all good range, anyways, in this part of Texas. And by the time we moved our herds and belongin's and built new homes—well, we ain't got enough cash even to begin. Right where we're camped belongs to a friend and neighbor; it's pore land, rocks and not much grass but it's claimed. Over west a ways lies the great desert, useless.

"I'm gittin' on in years; if it was just myself I'd accept the offer I had for my ranch, though I'd ruther die in the Valley. But I can't let my people down; if I quit they all will. They'll scatter and a bunch 'll die in poverty after lives spent at hard work buildin' up their spreads."

CHAPTER IV

The Clue

REESE was silent. June Lane entered, bearing food for the guest: cold beef and beans and biscuit, hot coffee. When she had gone, the detective said, "You had an offer for your ranch, Judge? Who would wish to buy land that has such a terrible menace to it as your Valley seems to have?"

Lane shrugged. "An Easterner, a ratty lookin' feller, come along day afore yestidday. Offered me two thousand dollars for my sections. Why, they're wuth two *hundred* thousands —or they was. The Valley was appraised round two millions, land alone."

"Did this man say why he wanted it?"

"Yeah; fer a huntin' preserve. Yuh see, all sorts of game come down to the river—deer, beaver, otter and wolves; bear, too."

"But you refused to sell?"

Judge Lane stared at him. "Yes suh, I did. I'm determined to save my friends. If I sell, they all will, for a song and a damn short tune at that. But we may be forced to."

"Who made you this picayune offer?"

"Let's see—Fred Winters, he said his name was. That's it. Said I could leave a message for him at the Golden Steer Saloon in Carville 'case I changed my mind 'bout sellin'."

"I understand." And Reese thought, "If Lane had died tonight, either through that poison or by a drygulcher's bullet, it would have broken up his people. His discouraged friends would have sold out."

It was too strong a lead for such a man as Reese to miss. There must be, he decided, some connection between this offer for the Valley as a hunting preserve and the attempt on Lane's life. He kept this to himself, formulating it in his clever brain. Someone, evidently, had grown impatient at the Judge's stubbornness in clinging to the Valley.

"I'd advise you, sir, to place a guard around your camp at night, men you can trust. After what's occurred, this must be done."

"Mebbe yuh're right." A flicker of pain passed across the old face, as on the gentle night breeze came to them the wailing of a woman. "I've heard a lot of that lately, suh, too much. That's Burt Young's wife; they have three kids, Reese."

Reese's lips set in a firm line. "There isn't much I can do before daylight. Then I'll get started."

"Yuh have an idea where to begin, then?"

Reese nodded. He suspected there was a great deal more to this Lane Valley trouble than simply assisting stricken members of the Cattlemen's Protective Association. At his request Judge Lane went out and returned with Charles Prentiss, the Eastern scientist.

Dr. Prentiss's eyes beamed behind his glasses as he shook hands with the range detective. "Judge Lane has been telling me something about the Valley trouble," Reese began. "Have you discovered anything yet, Doctor?"

PRENTISS shrugged. "As I told the Judge," he said in his slow voice, "it's a very large area to cover. My first idea was that some poisonous

pollen, from a great growth of toadstools or fungus, had caused the poisoning. I'm collecting bones from dead animals and I need to make a postmortem on the remains of two or three human victims as well. I need more reagents; that's why I rode over here tonight."

"I sent a man to fetch the package," remarked Lane.

Reese had passed the waddy. It was the turning-off by the quartet of drygulchers, when the cowboy came along, that had first aroused the detective's suspicions and made it possible for him to save Lane's life.

Dr. Prentiss was a slow, easy-going person, though keen in his chosen field; he was chiefly interested in his work and liked to talk of it.

"It seems to me," said Reese gravely, "that someone tried to poison you, Judge Lane, and that Ah Wong, your cook, tasting your dish, died in your place. The fact that nobody else was taken ill from eating the food makes it practically certain."

"That's right," agreed Prentiss. "Someone must have dropped poison into your meal, Judge."

"Could you make a guess as to what it was?" asked Reese of the scientist.

"I think it was an alkaloid poison. There were tetanic reactions."

"On the order of strychnine?" asked Reese.

The scientist nodded. "Yes, you're a well-educated man, aren't you, Mr. Reese? I would have said strychnine though it's only a guess—I would need to examine the viscera."

"Have your daughter prepare your food, and tell her to watch it," Reese said to the Judge. "There must be a traitor in your camp, someone who sneaked out and dropped poison in your dish while Ah Wong wasn't lookin'."

"Why, all these people are my friends—" Lane began, but he broke off, shrugged. He was badly shaken, and willing to accept the advice of the range detective.

Prentiss said, "I quite agree with Mr. Reese, Judge. You must be very careful."

Reese was weary from the long, swift run to the far-off Trans-Pecos region.

"I think I'll turn in now, Judge. Be on the safe side and set your guards immediately. Doctor, it's been a pleasure to meet you, and I'm counting on your assistance in discovering what has gone wrong with the Lane Valley. In case there's any chemical analysis I want done, will you help me out?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Reese, most certainly!" The scientist beamed, shook hands warmly with the range detective.

Lane rose and showed Reese where the detective might sleep. The Eastern investigator rolled up in a blanket, on a cot, for the rest of the night.

REESE was awake and alert by the time the first grey streaks of dawn touched the sky. The great camp of the dispossessed Lane Valley men still slept save for silent armed sentries placed on Reese's advice by the Judge.

After a cold breakfast, the star manhunter of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, saddled up the livery stable plug and started on the trail back to Carville. Much as he wished to check over the Lane Valley, he felt that speed at the moment in tracking the drygulchers was vital and he wanted to start before the sign grew cold.

He needed the light of day for such work, and, as the sun touched the east with its ruby glow, he paused to check the point where the quartet of riders had left the bush after making a wide circle around the encampment, and headed back to town.

"That kind would go back to report," he thought aloud.

He dismounted, for he was hunting sign; he clicked his straight lips in satisfaction as he found what he was hoping for: a dark-brown stain on a flat white stone at the side of the trail.

The beast bucked once (Chap. VIII)

"He's bleeding," he muttered. "Someone's come over this trail since they have, too!" In several spots he detected hoofprints that overlapped the markings left by the murderous four.

Three miles south of the Lane camp, Reese paused again, to scan the way, for here the gunmen had stopped. There was a large blood splotch and the range detective picked up a small strip of cloth that he guessed had been torn from a bandanna kerchief.

"Bandaging him to stop the bleeding," he thought. One of the horses belonging to the quartet he was trailing had a missing nail in the left foreshoe, a glaring sign to an expert tracker. The party had stopped every so often to allow their wounded comrade to rest.

The sun was golden yellow. The waddy Reese had met the night before came along, riding toward him out of Carville, humming a careless song to the wind. He had an express package addressed to "Dr. Charles Prentiss, Carville, Texas," tied to his saddle cantle, and solemnly he saluted the range detective, saying, "I see they missed yuh."

Gravely Reese asked, "Who?" though inwardly he smiled, for he knew there must be a jest coming; however, he did not wish to deprive this son of the range of the innocent

sport of kidding a supposed tenderfoot.

The waddy replied, "Why, them backwalker bears."

"Backwalkers?"

"Yeah. They walk backwards so's yuh can't shoot 'em between the eyes, savvy?" Pleased, the waddy waved his hand and shoved on home.

Reese went on. Five miles out of Carville, as the land dropped toward railroad level, the four had made one of their stops; and, after that, Reese noted that the indentations made by one set of hoofs was deeper while another had lightened. "Carrying him! He must have fainted."

IT was around noon when Reese swung into Carville's Main Street. The sets of hoofs had been lost in the dust of the beaten wide road, but, casting about from right to left, he picked them up, sure of them from that missing-nail shoe, and familiar with their other characteristics.

He decided they ended at the large barn he could see along Tin Can Alley, but he was too wary to ride up alone, in daylight, to the place where tracks ended; the quartet, which had hit town during darkness, would have been forced to dump their wounded comrade nearby. The barn would make a good hiding-place.

Reese walked his horse along Main Street. At the south end was the railroad track, with a small station and some cattle pens, a watering tank for the engines; the town consisted of dry-timbered buildings, most of them unpainted, weathering in the hot sun.

Wooden awnings joined one another to shade the walks. There was a plaza in which grew some jaded looking bushes and trees; a small jail and sheriff's office attached to it. Half a dozen saloons, the biggest marked with a golden steer on a swinging board that creaked as it moved with the wind. A general store, an office or two, and Tin Can Alley to the rear, filled with stables and small shacks.

The whole place seemed sleeping in the warm Texas sunshine.

The Golden Steer had a large gambling palace next to it; it was marked "DUGAN'S ORIENTAL." It was chiefly busy at night, however.

Reese left his horse, ducked under the continuous hitch-rail, and stepped up on the low porch. He shoved in the batwing doors, and went inside.

There was a bartender behind the counter; a dozen men in range clothes hung on the bar or slouched at tables, boots in the sawdust. Down at the dark end, Reese noticed a group of fellows together. He took a stand where the bar curved in to meet the wall, at the front. The barkeeper strolled over to serve him. Reese ordered a whisky and when the server brought it, he said in a low voice:

"When you see Fred Winters, please tell him Judge Lane wishes to speak to him."

"Okay, mister. He was around yestidday. Mebbe he'll be in later tonight."

Reese was already mapping out his campaign. From what his clever brain had already deduced, there was deep mystery in the Lane Valley business. That offer to Lane, the attempt to murder him right after the Judge refused it—he wondered how big the thing might be. He must probe carefully, to find out—

A man in the group at the far end of the bar left his mates, swaggering toward the front batwings. Reese only glanced casually at him, from the corner of his eye; he had a hatchet-face, very narrow forehead, eyes that seemed squeezed together by the bony structure. There was, from the dark skin and high cheekbones, Mexican-Indian in him; skeleton hands flapped loose near the two six-shooters hanging at his protruding hips.

ONE of those down the bar was a giant of an hombre, with bluish beard stubble on a jutting, ugly jaw; he had small eyes, red as though with

a permanent, sulky fury. His clothes seemed small for him; he bulged in them. Greasy black hair showed under the tilted Stetson; he carried two Colts in fancy holsters.

"Hey—barkeeper," he thundered, banging the top of the bar so hard the glasses jumped. "Service here — pronto!"

The bartender hustled back to serve the exacting customer, turning away from Reese. The thin breed lurched suddenly from the straight line to the door, struck heavily against the detective, so heavily it knocked Reese backward and his drink, which he held in his hand, slopped over on his black coat.

"Why, damn yore soul," snarled Hatchet-Face. "Tryin' to snatch my gun, huh?"

Reese had no pistol showing; plainly he was a tenderfoot, a pilgrim, harmless; Hatchet-Face had come a long way out of his path to start a brawl. The barkeeper, called by the ugly giant to the other end, had his back turned.

Hatchet-Face's right-hand gun flashed from its braided holster; gun and hand were hidden by the bulge of the curving bar end. The black-muzzled six-shooter rose to pin Reese, hammer clicked back by its own weight under a yellow, bony thumb.

CHAPTER V

Saloon Brawl

THE attack, without any evident excuse or warning, was a complete surprise to the range detective. He had had no reason to believe he would be identified in Carville, marked by unseen enemies he had sensed and was feeling for.

To him, even as he moved to save his life from the vicious Hatchet-Face's onset, with only a fraction of an instant in which to make that play, came the understanding of that spare set of horse tracks superimposed over the prints of the quartet he had trailed. A spy must have ridden in, from Lane's settlement, brought the news to these men, a description of Reese as the person who had spiked the drygulching of Judge Samuel Bowie Lane.

The range detective's left hand,

[*Turn Page*]

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holding his glass, was in motion, almost clumsy in its slowness. That was to attract the narrow-faced breed's eye and hold it for the necessary moment Reese needed. The rest of the drink sloshed out, caught the breed in the face; Reese's right hand flicked out like the darting head of a striking rattlesnake. The hatchet-faced hombre's thumb, holding back the hammer, which controlled the firing of the trigger-filed weapon, rose, allowing the firing pin to fall—the muzzle was pointblank, two feet from Reese's vitals.

"Damn yuh—" Hatchet-Face snarled hotly.

There was no killing explosion, no murderous lead ripped through the detective's belly. He had made use of a trick few cared to chance; had rammed his right thumb unerringly between the sharp firing-pin on the hammer, and the cartridge, thus preventing the pin from contacting the shell.

To draw his opponent closer where he might grasp him by the throat and subdue him, Reese yanked at the pistol. As a rule a man would hold on for an instant, but Hatchet-Face, losing all semblance of drunkenness and acting with the lithe fury of a green-eyed panther, released his grip on the weapon; he fell back and away, and even as he was going down started the draw of his second Colt.

"Stop it—" began Reese.

But there was only one thing to do and he did it. His thumb forced the hammer back, he whipped the gun to reverse, fingers gripping guard and handle, lifted his thumb — the Colt belched red death.

The breed's second pistol was half up into firing position. It exploded and Reese felt the bullet burn his shoe top, heard the faint, ripping thud as it buried itself in the bar wood.

A hole the size of a ten-cent piece, bluish for a moment, then rapidly oozing red, appeared between the narrow eyes of Hatchet-Face. The gunman's hands went limp at the wrists, his head jerked back, banged the sawdust-covered floor; he flexed once, arched on boots and the top of his skull, then relaxed in the sawdust in death.

"Murder!" the dark-bearded giant shrieked at the far end of the room. "He's murdered Miguel, boys. Git him!"

SO certain had they been of Miguel's ability to end the fight that they had not pulled their own guns out. They had to dig for them, as Reese swung to face them. The door was but a few feet away but the range detective saw that if he tried to run out they would shoot him in the back before he could make it.

Reese kept the curve of the bar between himself and the trio now intent on getting him. "Hold those guns, gentlemen," he called calmly. "If you draw on me I'll shoot you."

The heavy shots, reverberating through the dim spaces of the Golden Steer, electrified Carville. Men came running from their homes, and women peeked from the windows.

The door of the sheriff's office flew open and a stocky man with a brown handlebar mustache and skin the color and texture of a crimson alligator's hide came roaring out, both Colts strapped on, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

Full-tilt, the sun catching the five-pointed star on his vest with scintillating flashes, he galloped to the Golden Steer, slid to a stop in the dust, and jumped to the porch. He shoved the batwing in with the barrel of the shotgun.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" he bawled.

"That dirty dude there done murdered pore Miguel Gonzales," shouted the giant, leader of the bunch down the bar.

"Put down yore pistol, pilgrim," snapped the sheriff, staring at Reese.

"I'll be glad to, Sheriff," Reese told him. "But take note it belongs to the

deceased. It matches the one in his hand, you see. I took it away from him when he tried to use it on me."

"That's the truth, as I seen it, Sheriff Borden," cried the excited barkeeper, running up. "I seen that part of it, though not the start. This gent acted mighty cool for a dude."

"He kilt Miguel and there was no need for it, Borden," insisted the big hombre, sidling up with his hard-eyed pals. He gave the bartender such a dog-eying the hombre slunk off, face scarlet.

Reese coolly regarded his enemy—for there was no doubt the big fellow loathed his guts. The small red eyes burned with hate; his blue-bristled chin stuck out; he had a cruel mouth, a smashed nose. He wore black chaps, spurred halfboots bent over at the outsides by his great weight. In fancy holsters showed black-butted sixes whose walnut stocks were smooth from much handling.

The sheriff quickly checked Miguel's two pistols, the gun the breed had fired, the other Reese had taken away to use on its owner.

"I know Gonzales' guns, and these're both his'n," growled Borden.

There were a couple of citizens, too, who had swung in time to see the last of the fight, as Miguel fell back and tried to kill Reese.

"'Twas self-defense—" began one, but, catching the glare of the giant's hard eyes, he relapsed into an embarrassed silence.

"Aw right. Yuh come on over to the office with me, stranger," ordered the sheriff in a businesslike tone.

"Gladly, Sheriff," replied Reese.

HE walked out ahead of the official. The sheriff took him across the end of the plaza to the jail and into the small office, at the rear of which were steel bars set upright in the cement floor.

"Siddown," growled Sheriff Borden.

Reese complied. His movements, save when in a fight were deliberate, almost elegant; he had a very courteous manner that was so mild it was deceptive.

The sheriff shut the thick oaken door, bolted it — for citizens were gathering in the plaza. Then he yanked open a drawer in his desk, extracted a box of cigars and held it out to the range detective.

"Have a see-gar," he said gruffly. "Yuh won it for that bull's-eye. Saved me a nasty job. That Miguel Gonzales shore had it comin' to him. Though how sech a dude as you managed to down the fastest breed on wheels both sides of the Line beats me."

"Thanks, Sheriff," replied Reese softly, pleased with the official's reaction. "I am glad you're taking it as it really happened. His attack was without provocation."

"Dunno 'bout that," replied Borden, "but there shore wasn't any excuse fer it. The barkeep told the truth—and them other citizens started to, though they lost their nerve when Dugan dog-eyed 'em. I didn't say much at the saloon; feared Blackjack might take a shot at yuh. He's one tough hombre and yuh better jump the evenin' train outa town. I'll keep yuh locked up here, safe and sound, till then."

"Who is this Dugan?" inquired Steve Reese.

"Oh, he's round the town. A gambler. Owns that big Oriental Palace next the Golden Steer. I pussonally b'lieve him and that Miguel devil used to run stolen cows up from Mexico. I put a stop to that though I never caught 'em cold. What Dugan and his gang are up to now, I dunno, except the usual game of trimmin' and cheatin' suckers."

Reese ruminated. Then he said, "I feel I ought to tell you who I am, Sheriff. My name is Steven Reese and the Cattlemen's Protective Association sent me down here to see what they could do to assist Judge Samuel Lane and his stricken people."

"I savvy. That's fine. They shore need help; they're in a bad mess. That

June Lane

Valley's done for; nuthin' kin live in it."

"I haven't had a chance to look it over yet. Have you any idea how many men Blackjack Dugan can command?"

Sheriff Borden shrugged. He bit the end off a cigar but did not light it, began chewing it instead. His handlebar mustache worked up and down like a seesaw, and the lobster skin of his complexion stayed permanently red. The wrinkles under his pale eyes were white streaks in this expanse of crimson, a startling effect. But he was a kindly man, Reese decided, and an honest one.

"PLENTY, I reckon," answered Borden. "There was forty or fifty in that rustler band accordin' to their trail. Yuh kin allus pick up gunmen at a few dollars a haid if yuh want 'em. I've heard tell, too, that Dugan's a friend of Vasco Salcedo, the Mex outlaw."

"Oh yes—I've seen circulars from police officials and counties that want Salcedo."

Borden waved his stubby hand to the wall behind Reese. "There's one now." Reese swung to stare at it, nodded.

"If you'll do me a favor," he said, "I'll write out a telegram and have you send it for me immediately. I'm going to send for a couple of friends of mine who also work for the C.P.A. Since Dugan seems so strongly entrenched I may need help."

"Okay. I'll do anything I kin."

Borden waited while Reese wrote his wire to his two assistants, "Dusty" Trail and Hank Ball. The sheriff took it and strode out. Though the railroad station was only a short walk south, Borden mounted his horse and rode the distance; like so many Westerners he never walked a step if he could ride.

Reese waited in the office, watching from the window as Blackjack Dugan and a number of tough looking hombres circulated around, evidently trying to work up a lynching bee. But citizens seemed to fear Dugan; they shied away, the crowd dispersed.

The sheriff quickly returned. "I sent her. How 'bout a game of seven-up to while away the time, Reese?"

For an hour they played cards. Blackjack Dugan grew tired of waiting around; he left a man on the saloon porch to watch the jail, and disappeared through a narrow alley that ran between the Golden Steer and a store next it.

"Does he live over there?" asked Reese.

"Yeah, in Tin Can Alley, behind the Oriental. Got a big barn fixed up where him and his mates sleep—when they sleep, which is usually daytime. I've noticed gunmen driftin' in lately, and they haid for Dugan's. It's to the Golden Steer stable, set back a ways. Painted red."

The tracks of the drygulchers Reese had trailed in from the Lane encampment had led up to the big red barn; Reese had noted the fact. Undoubtedly the wounded were sheltered in Dugan's barn, cared for there.

"Tonight," he thought, "I'll have a look at the barn. And—I've got to find who rode in from Lane's and warned

Dugan I was coming."

He had sent for Trail and Hank Ball; they would come a-running, as fast as they could make it. He had felt out the opposition to a certain extent and the farther he went, the more powerful it appeared to be.

There was danger in this job; imminent threat of violent death from the forces of evil swirling about the innocents of Lane Valley. Reese was well aware that his interference had caused the guns of the killers to turn his way.

But no fear touched his cool, efficient brain. He only meant to take the proper precautions, for he must not fail, could not fail the decent folk for whom he was fighting.

CHAPTER VI

Two Answer the Call

A SHORT, roly-poly man, his clothes carelessly wrinkled, alkali dust embedded in the seams of his scratched leather chaps and in the folds of his worn brown vest, shoved back his huge Stetson, turning his cherubic face to the companion who sat beside him. He rolled his head on his round, fat shoulders, grimaced with discomfort.

"Seems like my neck's busted," growled Dusty Trail. "I prefer a hoss, Hank."

"Yeah, but if'n yuh git any fatter, what'll the hoss prefer?" the red-haired young devil by him asked gravely.

"Shucks," Trail muttered. "I kin fork anything and I'd ruther ride the wust outlaw bronc ever kicked than jerk along behind an engine."

Joseph Jehosephat Trail, otherwise "Dusty," of Waco, Texas, was a typical, careless son of the range. He loathed any other form of locomotion than riding a mustang.

His partner, Henry Hanscombe Ball, a handsome young fellow with fiery red hair and a lean fighting jaw, always enjoyed baiting his friend. The level, dark-blue eyes of the carrot-top danced with a secret mirth. His 190 pounds of lean sinews and big bones contrasted startlingly with the chubby, circular Trail. Cutaway gun holsters, filled with Colts, rode Ball's trim thighs.

The train they were riding was a huckleberry affair, the one passenger coach attached to several freight cars, drawn by an old, asthmatic engine. At every cowshed or watertank the train halted with terrible groans, jerking nervously back and forth. The stack belched a black smoke that seemed solid, it was so full of soft-coal cinders; and poor Dusty was continually getting one in his eye.

"Well, yuh wanted to sit by the winder," Ball commented, as Dusty swore and wiped at his reddened eyes with his bandanna. "It reminded yuh of when yuh was a kid, yuh said. I'll bet yuh was an annoyin' brat."

Dusty Trail was used to his partner's kidding. He seldom paid any attention to it. He reached in a vest pocket and brought out a yellow paper, holding it in his broad, pudgy hand for the fiftieth time.

"Doc says we gotta hurry," he remarked, "but this train just don't give a damn, Hank. Why, I could walk backwards faster'n this old she-wolf of an engine."

"It'll git us there," Ball assured him. "I only hope Doc leaves us some excitement in Carville. I'd hate to sacrifice myself this-a-way and git nuthin' for it."

"He says not to let anybody savvy we're friends of his. Wonder how he figgers on contactin' us?"

"Why, by spirit message of course."

The train yanked forward, without warning, nearly snapping their spines

as it decided to proceed again.

"Car-ville—next sto-op!" shrieked a brakeman, sticking his head in the front door and never losing a beat of his jaws as they champed a tobacco cud that completely filled one leathery cheek.

In the seat across from the one the partners occupied reposed their pet saddles, without which they would not have thought of moving. Other gear, spare shirt, this, that and the other thing, they could pack into a few inches of canvas bag.

DARKNESS was falling over the plains. After a few minutes the brakeman stuck his masticating jaw in the door again and bellowed, "Car-ville. Car-ville."

"Well, c'mon," ordered Hank Ball, stretching his long legs and arms as he rose. "Let's hope the likker's good."

The train was jerking to a stop and through the cinder-dim windows they saw the twinkling yellow lights of a cowtown.

The two shouldered their gear, and, half falling off the high step to the uneven cinder walk by the track, paused for a moment, sniffing the aromatic night odors of the chaparral, the arid Trans-Pecos region mingling its bracing air with the smoky smell of the engine's exhaust.

"Oof," grunted Dusty Trail, sneezing some cinders from his throat and nose. "I'd ruther fight a passel of wildcats than take that trip ag'in, Hank."

They moved over to the shadows; a single lantern burned outside the small station, and the station agent, ticket-seller, telegrapher and freight agent—all the same man—was yelling up at the expressman at the front end of the train.

The two, one so tall and rangy, the other so roly-poly, stood beside one another, staring at Carville's Main Street.

"Hey, Bat and Ball!"

A man hailed them from the dense velvet shadow, and Dusty's pudgy right paw instinctively itched toward the gun at his side.

"Hold it," whispered Hank, "it's the Law!"

A stocky hombre with a handlebar mustache and red face, five-pointed star on his open vest, stepped out, holding up a hand to the two cowboys.

"This way," he ordered.

They hoisted their leathers and passed to the darkness behind the water tank. A man was waiting there for them.

"Doc!" exclaimed Hank Ball. "What yuh skulkin' round here for? Don't they let yuh walk about without a police escort in these parts?" He hooked a long thumb toward the sheriff.

"It's almost that," replied Reese, his even white teeth showing in a smile of greeting. He knew that Hank Ball, despite his inveterate light jesting manner, was devoted to him heart and soul; the three had worked together on many a dangerous trail, and any one would have given his life, gladly, to save the others.

"Happy to see you, Hank—and you, Dusty. I need you. We must get going at once. Now listen carefully: I had to shake off a couple of gunmen who've dogged me constantly — they're employes of a gambler called Blackjack Dugan here.

"Sheriff Borden — these are my partners, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. The sheriff's about the only man I can fully trust in Carville as yet, boys. I came here secretly to meet you, as I don't want you spotted as my friends now."

HANK and Dusty listened; despite their careless happy-go-lucky appearance, they never missed anything in their line, and aiding Doc Reese was certainly their line.

"Is this all about the Lane Valley trouble?" asked Trail.

"Yes. I'm in touch with Judge Lane

and his folks, who had to flee the Valley—they call it the Valley of Death now, because so many died there."

"From what?" inquired Ball.

"Of that I'm not yet sure. I must get up there and look it over myself. But I didn't dare leave Judge Lane unguarded long enough to make a thorough search. Hank, that'll be your job, to watch Lane and make sure he's not murdered. You can trail me out of town shortly, and I'll lead you to the camp."

"And how 'bout me?" asked Dusty Trail.

"I want you to stay in town, Dusty, for a while. Behind the Golden Steer saloon and the Oriental is a stable, and back of it, a little to the north, stands a big barn, painted red. It's the hangout of this Blackjack Dugan. Dugan has a bunch of tough gunmen. Sheriff Border can point some of them out to you, secretly, of course.

"You keep an eye on Dugan and, if possible, work in with him. You might pose as a man from up North with a stolen herd to sell. Hang around, watch Dugan and the town. I'm sure he has a direct connection with the Lane Valley trouble. There's a badly wounded man in that barn, one I shot the other night when they tried to drygulch Judge Lane."

"And they dang near got yore smooth friend here," Sheriff Borden added, "Dugan sickin' one of his slickest gunfighters on him. Only he was too quick for 'em."

"So yuh been fightin' already," growled Ball enviously.

"We've buried one and are hopin' for another," Borden jested.

"Dugan's attempt to kill me was a help," Reese told his two friends. "It told me someone from Lane's camp had warned Dugan about my identity as a C.P.A. investigator."

"Yuh mean there's a traitor in Lane's bunch?" asked Hank.

"Yes. A man I want you to watch constantly, Hank. I'll tell you who he is and point him out to you. I'm convinced he tried to poison Judge Lane, too."

"How'd yuh spot him?" asked Dusty curiously.

"Evidently he was listening outside Lane's cabin when I talked with the judge the first night I arrived," explained Reese. "He headed for town and warned Dugan. He kept out of my sight but by inquiring at the Lane camp who had been missing at dawn, I discovered his identity. But there's no time to talk, boys. Let's start."

"And what," inquired Dusty Trail suspiciously, "are you goin' to be doin', while me'n Hank are sportin' ourselves around?"

"I'm heading for the Lane Valley, at dawn."

"I KNEW it," exclaimed Trail. "Listen, Doc, from all I've heard of that Valley it ain't safe. S'pose yuh die the way so many have up there? Lemme ride the trail with yuh, and Hank kin stay in town with the girls—he'll like that."

"Why, yuh roly-poly hairball," snapped Hank. "If anybody goes with Doc, I do. Yuh—"

Reese silenced them with a look from his penetrating eyes. "Do as I say, boys. Get at it. We've got to work fast. Hank, the minute I leave town, Dugan's men will spot me and one or two will probably follow me. So lie back a bit and keep your eyes peeled. They may try to shoot me in the back any time."

"I'll see yuh're furnished with a good hoss," offered Borden.

Hank Ball shouldered his saddle. Reese melted away in the shadows, going on ahead, while Dusty Trail waited until they had had a chance to get going.

He heaved a heavy sigh as he picked up his gear, and, bent over with the weight of it, took his bowlegged way up Main Street, with the train puffing away in the western distance.

Later, from the shadows of the plaza, Dusty, having dumped his sad-

dle under an old live-oak, watched Doc Reese swing out on the trail north.

When Reese was just out of sight round the first turn in the bushy road, Dusty saw two dark-figured horsemen trot from back of a barn and take the trail after Reese.

"Shore enough, they're doggin' him," he muttered.

And a minute later he added, "And there goes Hank. Them two 'll be between Doc and Hank, anyways." He saw his pal swing in, last of the parade.

Alone in a strang cowtown, Dusty Trail decided to have a look-see for himself. He took a stroll up the west side of Main Street, sniffed at the various saloons, and paused at the north end. Music was coming from the dance halls; the town had livened up some at night. His creased eyes sought the dense shadows of Tin Can Alley; it was on that side, he knew, that Dugan's barn lay.

He stood, weight on one leg, as he rolled himself a quirly. And a few minutes later, despite the competing sounds of the town, to Dusty's keen ears came the far-off, spattering crackles that gunshots make.

"Hank must've trod on their heels," he thought. "Wisht I was out there, just to be on the safe side." But much as he yearned to be fighting with his mates, he had to obey orders.

Determinedly Dusty plodded down the east sidewalk, under the wooden awnings, peeking in at merrymakers in dancehalls and saloons. At the Golden Steer and Oriental he could peek through the alley between buildings, and back of the low stable see the bulk of Dugan's red barn. It looked dark, deserted; but as he watched, a blanket was lifted and in the yellow candlelight a huge figure was framed for a moment.

"That'll be Blackjack, I bet," he decided.

BLACKJACK DUGAN, a giant figure in the night, came up the alley toward him, but as Dusty shrank back, Dugan turned into a side door of the Golden Steer.

Trail went upon the front veranda, and hit a batwing. He slipped quietly into an empty space along the bar. Dugan, swaggering in his tough, two-gun manner, shoved a place clear for himself in the middle of the long counter, called for drinks.

"He does look like a nail-biter, at that," thought Dusty. "Doc shore does meet a lot of hard guys."

He was watching Dugan though no one would have thought so; he could see the giant hombre in the bar mirror. He noted the gunmen who crowded around Blackjack, evidently members of his gang. There was a gangling rascal in black chaps and hairy black Stetson, a man whose bones were almost as obvious as a skeleton's; a fat fellow with a great paunch, sullen and dour of countenance; a half dozen cronies, all of them with death written on the efficient guns they toted.

Dusty was still wondering how Hank Ball and Steve Reese had made out on the north trail, when galloping hoofs smacked in the road outside, and a rider slid to a stop in a cloud of dust, disturbing horses tied to the continuous hitchrail along Main Street.

The horseman threw himself from his saddle, tossed his reins over the rail so the mustang would stand. For an instant he paused on the porch; when he shoved through the swinging doors, he was puffing for breath and wiping dirt and blood off his cheek with a dust-streaked bandanna handkerchief.

Trail threw a curious glance at the newcomer. There was a wolfish look about him; he had on crossed cartridge belts; his grey Stetson was strapped tight, drawing up his chin in a bunch of leathery flesh at his jowls. Two teeth were gone in front, Dusty could see the gaps, for the hombre's lips curved in a crooked snarl. Then,

Lewis rode behind Olliphant, prodding him on (Chap. XIII)

as he put down the bandanna, Dusty saw that one side of his face was ground with dirt, and was badly lacerated.

"Must've gone slidin' on his ear," Trail decided.

Inside the batwings, the hombre stopped, bobbed his head to someone past Dusty. Dusty, interested in the man up front, was rubbernecking and a heavy shoulder knocked against his head, throwing him violently against the bar.

Dusty suddenly realized that Blackjack Dugan, strolling up to meet the fellow who had entered, found Dusty in his way and resented it.

Blackjack dog-eyed him, growling, "Can't a man walk around here without bumpin' into ev'ry two-bit hoss-thief in the country?"

"Sorry, Mister, sorry," Dusty apologized quickly and abjectly—he did not wish to attract attention. He felt a surge of hot anger at Dugan's unnecessary insult; but he pressed against the bar, turning away his head.

He could still see them though, in the mirror.

The hombre with the missing teeth went outside, and Blackjack Dugan trailed him.

Dusty was honing to find what the report was; he was sure it was about those gunshots he had heard, coming from the trail on which Doc Reese and Hank Ball had ridden.

CHAPTER VII

The Chief Strikes Hard

DUSTY TRAIL, taking a chance on what Dugan's pals might do if they thought he was trying to hear what Dugan was saying to his man, sidled toward the door.

He could just catch Blackjack's furious cursing. "So Vern's daid, huh, Lanky?" boomed the giant.

"Yeah—somebody was behind us, boss. Kilt my hoss and I hit dirt. I managed to leap on Vern's cayuse and escape acrost the flats. . . ."

Their voices faded off. Dusty had to go back to pay his score, and then he sauntered out onto the front porch, peeked down the alley. Blackjack Dugan and Lanky were slouching through to Tin Can Alley. No doubt to the barn. Dusty heaved a heavy sigh.

"Might as well make it now as later," he thought.

A glance behind told him he was clear and, going to the walk, he took the other passage alongside the saloon, hurried along it to the rear.

The Golden Steer's stable interposed between him and the roomy, red-painted barn that was Dugan's headquarters. Sliding around to the far side of the stable, Dusty was just in time with his peek to see the blanket dropping behind Dugan and Lanky.

The barn's rear was dark. He scuttled over there, and froze, ears cocked, but could only hear an unintelligible muttering.

"Hafta git closer in," he told himself.

He worked along the north face of the barn, to the corner around which was the blanket-door. A narrow streak of light came from a crack, attracting him; close to it he crouched, ear to that slight opening, and was able to catch Blackjack Dugan's purple language.

"Lanky and Vern were trailin' that dirty cattlemen's spy," raved Dugan, punctuating with profanity, "and caught him from behind, but just as they started to finish him off, somebody who was trailin' *them* opened fire, shot down Vern; and that Reese hombre swung and cut Lanky's hoss from under him. I've sent for Vasco Salcedo's bunch; soon as Vasco gits here we'll go after 'em all. I'll shoot that range detective myself, with pleasure. And them Lane Valley mutts 'll git theirs, too. We'll wipe 'em out, since they're so plumb mule-haided."

"What'll Morgan say to all that?" growled Lanky.

"The Chief already has agreed—" began Dugan.

Engrossed in this, Dusty Trail suddenly realized with a start that he was no longer alone.

A dark figure, muffled in a black Mexican cape, had come up, silent as the night air, from between the buildings of Main Street.

The chubby Trail, squatted there with ear glued to the crack, gasped in surprise at this apparition; he saw the upraised arm, the glint of light on a six-gun barrel already starting to crush in his skull. His hand flew to his pistol, hoping to get it out, realizing he could never make it in time, for the gun was slewed around out of position because of his bent, crouched body.

At the same time, he tried to roll out of the way of the descending Colt barrel, coming down with such a terrific swipe it swished like a blacksnake whip in the air.

HE only partially succeeded, for the sharp sight struck his temple with an awesome crack. Even as Trail caught the ruby fire of his foe's

eyes, heard the hiss of intaking breath from the effort as the hombre followed through with all his weight, he was knocked silly by the force of the blow.

Dusty folded up in a limp heap, gun half out of holster. The man who had hit him fell on him, silent as a murderous tarantula; he rammed a sharp knee into Dusty's belly, but there was little need for that.

Nor was there any use for the two finishing blows he clipped on the unconscious Trail's limp head; Dusty was out.

Seeing his prey was dead to the world, the cloaked man stepped to the blanketed doorway of the barn. "Dugan!" he snarled.

"Say — why, howdy, Morgan! Where the hell'd yuh pop from, huh?"

Blackjack Dugan was respectful in his warm greeting; there was almost fear in his deep voice as he faced the glinting eyes of the man he called Morgan.

"What was that scufflin' noise, Chief?"

"That," replied Morgan icily, "was a spy, listening to whatever you were spillin', Dugan. You dumb fool," he went on, through gritted teeth, "why haven't you sentries out? If I hadn't happened along there's no tellin' what this carrion might have heard. It was plain he was spying on you."

"Aw, I usually have a man outside," said Dugan sheepishly. "But Lanky come in jest now. Him and Vern tried to take keer of that range detective. Somebody cut in on 'em, kilt Vern and Lanky hadda run for it. I'm in favor of wipin' out the Lane camp, and pronto. Our man there'll tip us when to hit."

"You are, eh?" snapped Morgan coldly. "You're gettin' to think you can *think* but I'll tell you this: our man at Lane's is useless; a danger to us now, in fact, for Detective Reese knows he's a traitor and spy and will watch him every instant, maybe break him into squealing and spilling the whole plan.

"His clumsy attempt to poison Lane fell through. The attack plan's okay, however, but it must be handled right. That's why I'm here. Lane has been warned and actin' on Reese's advice has guards out. I'm glad I had you send for Salcedo; we need him now, as I figured we might.

"The Valley people keep their cows not far from camp, in a grassy range west of the trail, between the road and desert. Only a few waddies guard 'em. Some of Salcedo's Mexes can rustle 'em; the cowboys 'll send back for help, and the whole bunch of Lane men will rush out to save their cattle. Then—ambush. I've been over that way and the perfect spot for it is the Gully, where the track runs between two steep clay cliffs for several hundred yards."

"Great," cried Blackjack Dugan, rubbing his hairy hands. "The quick-

[*Turn Page*]

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er we git it over with, the sooner we clean up, Chief."

THE gambler's reddened eyes fell on Dusty Trail as the fat, roly-poly man stirred and grunted awake. Dusty's ears roared, his head ached horribly, red lights flashed across his vision. As in a nightmare he heard Dugan, whose glance hardened as he drew a black-butted .45 and deliberately pulled back the hammer with his calloused thumb.

"I'll fix this skunk's hash, Morgan," he snarled, lip curved in a killer's sneer.

He took careful aim at Dusty Trail's head.

"Well, here I go," thought Dusty. His main regret was that he had allowed himself to be caught, and so failed Reese and Hank.

"Wait," snapped Morgan. Dusty couldn't see him, for Dugan interposed and the cloaked hombre kept back in the shadows. "Heat up an iron. If he can sing, we want to hear it. I could use a little bit of inside information."

"Okay, Chief," growled Blackjack Dugan. "It'll be a pleasure." And he added, "When yuh figger 'll be the best time for that Gully ambush? We can't leave any Lane man alive, yuh know, or I'll be ruint. Nobody has anything against me round here yet."

"Make it about six o'clock. They'll be just awake and there won't be anybody around on the trails."

"That'll be Thursday — six o'clock. I'll send a rider to hustle Salcedo in; he's over at the gulch in the desert now."

"Right. And don't forget to warn your man at the Lane encampment. He'll have to run for it."

"Iron's hot, Blackjack," growled a gunman, bringing over a glowing branding-iron.

Dugan seized it, lips curved cruelly.

"*S-s-t!*" the iron said as it seared Dusty's unlucky fat cheek.

"Sing," ordered the Chief grimly.

CHAPTER VIII

The Valley of Death

EAGER as Steve Reese had been to get on to the Lane Valley he had not dared leave Judge Samuel Bowie Lane until Hank and Dusty arrived to take care of the important ends he had uncovered in Carville and at the encampment of the stricken people.

A couple of miles north of the town, riding toward Lane's, with Hank Ball trailing him, Reese had suddenly became aware of Lanky and Vern, Dugan's gunmen, who were closing in on him. The swift brush with the two rogues had ended disastrously for the attackers; Hank's ready six-gun had killed Vern, while Reese had shot Lanky's horse from under him. By sheer good luck for himself, Lanky had managed to bounce off the ground and leap on his dead pal's rearing mustang, line the beast out, and spur aside into the mesquite.

Hank Ball, catching up with Reese, sniffed, "Nice playmates yuh got round here." The tall redhead stared down at the cruel, clenched teeth of the rat-like Vern, who had a neat bullethole through his head.

"I warned you what you might expect," Reese replied coolly, as he squatted by the corpse and went through the dead man's pockets—there was nothing of interest therein. "They've been trailing me—you see, they have their spy in Lane's camp. He reported on me to Dugan."

"But yuh know who this traitor is?"

"Yes. I'll point him out to you, Hank. I want him to be given rope, to see where he'll lead us."

Riding on, they had reached the big settlement of Lane Valley citizens, ar-

riving about the time Dusty Trail felt the horrible sear of a redhot saddle pin on his fat cheek.

A handsome, blond young giant challenged them, Winchester held across his arm, face set. "Hello, Olliphant," called the detective quietly. "It's Steve Reese and a friend."

Barney Olliphant relaxed, as he recognized the urbane Reese. He dropped his rifle muzzle. "The Jedge is still up," he remarked.

Olliphant glanced at the handsome, red-haired Hank Ball.

Unaware of the misfortune that had befallen their pal Dusty Trail, the two dismounted, turned their unsaddled horses into the nearby corral, and approached Lane's house.

Inside, Hank's quick blue eyes did not miss the pretty girl who sat sewing in a corner. Reese introduced Ball to the old Judge. "Hank will take charge while I'm gone," Reese announced.

Reese had a bite to eat, and stuffed some dried beef and biscuits in his saddlebags. Lane furnished him with one of the camp's best horses, and Detective Reese mounted to head north for the Valley of Death.

Hank Ball stood by his stirrup, staring up into his friend's calm face. "Take it easy, now," Ball growled.

Reese nodded. He leaned over, to whisper a name in Hank's ear. "Keep an eye on him," he warned. "He's undoubtedly Dugan's spy."

Hank nodded, stood and watched Reese fade off in the darkness.

REESE rode through the night. The first of the dawn light tinged the sky to his right as his horse climbed the rim and he paused to stare across the beautiful country.

"Looks innocent enough," he muttered. "Why, it's lovely."

The Lane River, a white mist marking its course, flowed peacefully through the center of the gorgeous valley; Reese could make out the shapes of ranches here and there. He swung west, riding down a wide slope carpeted with high grass, looking from side to side, hunting for some sign that might explain the death which had devastated the Lane River Valley.

He came to a deserted home; a coyote slunk from his path, and he noticed plenty of wild birds about. "If they can live here," he thought, "why can't men, and their animals?"

A dead patch of grass, fifteen or twenty yards in diameter, attracted him; he pushed his horse toward it in the growing light. The mustang put down his velvety muzzle, to crop the brown, dry grass. Reese jerked his reins. "I wouldn't," he said.

Leading the horse away, he dismounted, and went to have a closer look at the dead grass. Not far away he saw bare skeletons, several steers, a couple of horses.

As the sun rose up, to turn yellow behind him, he rode on, kept riding west, making a quick survey first of all. He meant to return for a more careful investigation after he had an idea of the whole. His quick eye took in the animal skeletons here and there, and graves, the forlorn looking homes.

It was near noon when he finally reached the western extremity of the Valley, and, through the gap, with the roaring of the Lane River Rapids in his ears, he could look down on the coppery desert stretches.

He rested in the shade by the cool water, ate a bite of lunch, before remounting and starting back east to finish his first survey of the big Valley.

"Z-z-in-g--ga!" Something that, for an instant, he thought a giant hornet whipped the air, a foot from his Stetson.

"Rifle bullet," he muttered, "and half a mile away!"

Hearing it thud into the bushed, rising bank across the river, to the north, he whirled and rode back, watching the south rim of the Valley. A second angry long slug cut a chunk from his Stetson.

Whoever was shooting at him was an expert with a rifle. Reese's keen dark eyes, glowing in the light, caught the scintillating sunlight on the barrel of the gun; the drygulcher was up among the trees on the south lip.

Reese looked hurriedly for cover; the nearest was a bunch of rocks not far from the river. A third bullet tore across the pommel of his saddle, the singed odor of the leather cutting his nostrils; the fourth hit his horse with an odd, solid plunk. The beast bucked once.

AS the stricken animal sank in death to the ground, Reese scuttled for the rocks, threw himself down beside them as he heard a fifth .30-30 missile shriek past his ear. He fell flat on his face, heavily, as though hit. Inching one hand to his six-shooter, Reese drew it, lay quiet, gun concealed by his body.

"I wonder if he'll draw," he murmured.

He lay silent, hoping the drygulcher would decide he was hit, come down to finish him. Two more bullets rapped into the stones; he felt the spattering rain of leaden and rock fragments.

Then silence, save for the rippling of the river, the buzz of insects in the hot sunshine.

Minutes passed; Reese had to twitch a leg or an arm, as tortured muscles ordered, but he shifted almost imperceptibly, so as not to warn the man up above.

Half an hour had gone by; and still the drygulcher failed to show. Reese was about to give up, and rise, realizing the killer was too clever to be caught by the old Indian trick, when his left boot was nearly ripped, violently, from his foot. He felt the searing pain of the bullet that tore the leather and cut the flesh of his lower calf.

From the sound of the rifle, he knew that the unseen gunman was much closer, had spent the intervening minutes in working down to a point where he might kill Reese. Aware of the marksman's skill, Reese dared not take a chance longer, but quickly squirmed around to the river side of the rocks. He had scarcely made this move when the ground where he had lain threw up a spurt of dirt, a bullet striking right where he had been.

After Reese moved, silence once more came over the valley. "He can't get me now, without showing himself," Reese thought grimly.

The bank behind him was only about three feet high. Across the river bushes grew. Only a hundred yards down was a deserted ranch house, built close to the stream, and a low stone structure right at the brink, extending into the water. It was a springhouse, used by the ranchers to keep food cool, the river maintaining an even temperature inside.

The detective felt the warm blood that flowed from his wounded leg, sopping his sock and filling his split boot. Peering through the interstices between rocks, Reese watched for signs of the gunman above. The last shots had come, he judged, from a point that he might reach with his pistol, and he kept it ready.

Two quick shots, an interval, and a third, drew his alert attention. None of the slugs came anywhere near him, but he saw the spurts of smoke up above and throwing up his gun, he emptied it into the green bushes from which they had appeared.

After a short pause, the two shots, followed by a spaced third, sounded again.

The explanation of these, evidently a signal call, burst on Reese as he heard the tread of hundreds of hoofs, coming from the western trail that led in from the desert.

THE cavalcade, which shook the earth with its passing, swung into view, dark-faced men riding hairy, small mustangs jingling with silvered trappings. The horses and men were

covered with the yellow-grey dust of the desert; there were about sixty riders, Reese estimated at first glance.

Most of them wore black steeple sombreros, the sun gleaming back from the silver conchas ornamenting the high, peaked crowns. Their chinstraps were drawn tight with the elan of fighting men; the faces under the tall felts were dark brown, mustached or bearded. White teeth gleamed behind the purple lips. The majority of the horsemen were vaqueros, of Mexican and Indian blood; but Reese observed the renegade Americans sprinkled through the mob. His trained eye could pick them out despite the Mexican crimson sashes and garb, the Spanish whiskers and sideburns they sported.

On a black, wild Mexican mustang slouched the chieftain of the band, in the van. Steve Reese stared at him. The leader wore the same dress as his followers. But the mark of a chief was written all over that squat figure, from the silver-spurred, expensive riding boots to the rakishly tilted Stetson. The face was wide and square, but with high cheekbones showing an Indian strain; between bluish, thick lips big white teeth shone, over them the stiff black bristle of mustache. Curving sideburns adorned his brown cheeks, and black, beady eyes steadily traveled from one side of the trail to the other, ever on the alert. His chest was clad in red velvet shortcoat with two rows of large pearl buttons; his torso was crossed by bandilleros jammed with shells for the Colts. In the boot rode a sawed-off shotgun.

"Vasco Salcedo!" muttered Doc Reese.

From the Rio Grande to the Kansas line the name of Salcedo, the Indian-Mexican mestizo, was held in terror by decent folk. Tales of his brutal cruelty ranged the land. There were large rewards up for him. It was said he delighted in torturing his captives, to force them to disclose the hiding-

Blackjack Dugan

places of their wealth, or simply for the sport.

Sheriff Borden had mentioned Salcedo, as an ally of Blackjack Dugan's; and Reese was acquainted with the descriptions of such raiders of the range, had seen circulars from county sheriffs, and one in Carville. It was his business to be familiar with such men.

Salcedo's presence in the Valley of Death might be coincidence; but the fact that the man above, who had sought to murder Reese so persistently, had signalled the Mexican bandit, spelled a connection—besides, Dugan had probably sent for him—

But Doc Reese had little time in which to cogitate. He knew he could not possibly hold off such a horde, once they grew aware of him. Salcedo had heard the warning shots, had turned his blunt, cruel raider's face toward the bushes to the south; most of his men looked with him.

In Spanish, Reese heard him growl, "Panchito—our signal. Ride up, pronto, see who calls us."

A STEELY-EYED devil, an American with a dirty beard

stubble on a triangular jaw, detached himself from the right flank of the van, spurred his horse up the slope.

The rocks behind which Reese crouched were but fifty yards from the trail along which Vasco Salcedo rode. The detective's dead horse, lying so still under the hot sun, already covered by buzzing flies, suddenly caught the chieftain's roving eye. Reese heard him say, as he paused by the dead beast stretched on the earth, "Not long dead, *mi compadres.*"

Already the range investigator was worming back toward the drop of the river bank.

Flowering shrubs, the jagged rocks, helped hide him as the bandits clustered curiously about the dead mustang.

Panchito, who had disappeared in the chaparral above, suddenly burst into view, galloping full-tilt back toward Vasco Salcedo; he was standing up in his stirrups, yelling and pointing toward the spot where Reese moved.

The horde stared for a moment at the madly gesticulating Panchito, then realized he was indicating something toward the river, back of them. With one accord they swung, and several, among them the beady-eyed Salcedo, glimpsed Steve Reese as he slid down behind the river bank.

With a startled roar of comprehension, Salcedo whirled his horse, dug in his spurs; a pistol flashed into his brown hand, and, firing, he drove toward the point where Reese had disappeared.

Bullets cut the dirt, a mad frenzy of lead that tore the river bank and spattered the water like heavy rain. Hoofs pounded the ground as they rushed to cut Reese off.

Nothing could escape such a hail of death, sent at short range, in the bright light of the afternoon. Blue smoke rose from burnt powder; the yells of the excited pack, the smacking echoes of heavy guns, filled the warm, sunlit air.

CHAPTER IX

Siege

WITH only instants in which to choose a spot to hold off, if only for a short time, the ravening horde of Salcedo's wolves, Steve Reese's calculating, dark eyes roved as he rapidly slid down the stream, body bent to hide behind the bulge of the bush-fringed bank. Bullets tore the air; the horrid stunning shrieks of the guns dinned in his ears.

Within a few yards was the black, small opening of the flat-topped stone springhouse, facing the river. It was a tiny place but the walls were of thick rock to keep out the heat, and there was only one small loophole at the rear, too small to admit a man's body. With a final, desperate lunge, Reese lashed his dripping, lean-muscled body on, and dived through the door into the little storehouse. He landed flat in several inches of cool water.

Vasco Salcedo, one of the first to reach the bank, glimpsed Reese's boots as he pulled them after him.

"*Madre de dios*—there he goes, *amigos!* A spy. Celestino—take a dozen men and cut him off below—pronto."

The hot orders, in Spanish, lashed the air; Salcedo, an experienced campaigner, was taking the proper precautions to prevent his cornered prey from making another run for it. At his snapped commands, the bandit raiders drove in spurs, to form a semicircle that cut the small stone hut off on the land side.

Dripping wet, rapidly checking his six-shooter, filling it up, slapping the pockets where he had spare shells for

the gun, Steve Reese turned, crouched just inside the entry. The Lane flowed calmly outside. The lovely valley rose gradually to the northern rim. The sky was azure, lit by a golden sun; a flock of birds winged across the blue.

But right outside was death—not the mysterious agony that had fallen over Lane Valley, but swift oblivion. Reese gripped his delicately balanced .38, waiting, grimly waiting for them to come.

Vasco Salcedo knew his way around. He had engaged in many affairs such as this. He had never lost before. His keen black eyes took in the terrain, the aspects of the stone hut. It was only six feet square; the roof was thick, so were the walls. The approach from the river side was the only feasible one; and that narrow slit at the back would afford the defender inside an easy hole from which to shoot anyone coming up.

"Come out!" roared Salcedo, in accented English. "Come out, gringo. Or we shoot you to pee-ces."

He paused; Reese said nothing, simply waited, ankle deep in cool water. There were stone shelves built up at the sides, wide shelves on which pans of milk, and meats, might be kept from spoiling; the wooden door opened outward.

Salcedo snapped another order; shooting began. Slugs hit the slit at the back of the springhouse; a few came through, spattering unpleasant fragments on the crouched detective.

REESE turned; by raising himself a bit, yet keeping to the side out of the direct angle, he could spy several raiders through the little opening. He levelled his .38, and the roaring report of the gun in the confined space made his ears ring insanely. But a tight-faced hombre in black sombrero threw up both hands, gun flying off in the air as he lost volition, his legs relaxed and he slumped off his horse.

"Look out, look out for that hole!" shrieked another, spurring his shaggy mustang sideways.

Silence greeted Reese's shot; he listened, ears adjusting after the explosion of his own gun. Then he heard the splash of water. They were crossing the river, to get at him through the front door.

He watched as a dozen of them came creeping along the opposite bank. They seized every spot of cover, a small tree here, a rock there, or even just bushes. Reese let the leaders get almost directly across from the door. A peaked hat slowly rose from behind a rock; under the brim showed glittering, black eyes seeking the kill. An arm was thrust out, a rifle barrel took the sunlight as it pointed the door.

Reese steadied himself against the stone shelf with his left hand. The .38 spoke again and the peaked hat flipped off the greasy black scalp. A shriek, a demoniac shriek, resounded; the rifleman leaped three feet off the ground, flipped back, a bullet having taken away the top of his head.

The shot demoralized his mates; they fired hastily, fingers spasmodically contracting on triggers; a burst of bullets, bunched shotgun wads, splashed water in Reese's face as he ducked back inside his tiny fort.

The blasphemy of Vasco Salcedo reached the range detective's ears as he cursed his men for fools. Reese, taking advantage of the momentary lull that usually follows a volley, bobbed out for an instant and sent a slug through the shoulder of a man next in line to the dead man.

The pain-racked scream that followed shock his companions. They kept tight down behind what cover they had, and Reese got another who had made a bad choice, a bush that did not stop bullets. Then the others leaped up, ran out of range, and he emptied his .38 after them.

Rapidly refilling the gun, he waited. His injured leg ached in the water; his clothes, usually so neat, were spat-

tered with mud, sopped with blood and water.

Yet there was no trembling of muscles, no fear that might interfere with his actions. Detective Reese had fought such men as Salcedo before. He was aware that the surest way to die was for him to lose his coolness for a moment.

Salcedo, safe out of range behind the east wall of the stone hut, took stock. He had lost four vaqueros and was no nearer to taking the man in the springhouse than he was before.

REESE, listening intently to guess what they were up to, heard a man reporting, "He's a range detective. Morgan says so. You're to kill him."

"Morgan," muttered Reese. "Haven't heard of him. I wonder if he's the fellow who was potting at me from the hill!"

Had it not been for the direct order from Morgan, Salcedo might have led his raiders on. But now he gave commands, cursing hotly at his hombres. No further attempt was made to rush the door of the springhouse. That was too deadly.

With a breathing-spell, Reese went to the little slit at the back of the hut, peeked through—the stone was three-foot thick. He could just glimpse, to the left, a rider's thigh, a velvet-legged section of vaquero; a bullet in it sent the rider and horse leaping away, yelling.

The first fury of Salcedo's rage died away in his murderous heart, was replaced by an icy determination to kill, and by torture, the man who had so crippled his band. The circle dismounted; the horses were led back, to be turned out to graze. The bandits rolled cigarettes, or drew bottles from their saddlebags, threw themselves down in the shade to wait. More were sent across the river, to watch that side but at a respectful distance behind rocks that would turn lead.

They were waiting, like the pack of wolves they were, waiting for the moment when the man in the stone hut would be forced to emerge. No matter how long it took, Salcedo would wait.

"Panchito," Reese heard the chieftain growl, "ride up and ask Señor Morgan if he has any blasting powder."

"But he rode on, Vasco."

"Catch him, then."

Blasting powder! They might creep up to the blank side of the shack, set a charge that would breach the wall, stun him so that they might reach him. . . .

Reese shrugged, found a drier place to roost on the wide stone shelf. Minutes dragged out into hours; he lay there, hunched up, listening, waiting to hear Panchito return to report. The sun was hot but the water maintained a cool temperature in the tiny stone hut.

The banditos were taking siesta, smoking, playing cards or drinking, just waiting, waiting.

It was 4:30 by Reese's fine gold watch, which still ticked on despite the wetting it had taken, when the shouts of approaching men roused him from a torture of fighting off the drowsiness gripping his eyelids.

Up on his elbow, he listened, then rose and peeked from the narrow slit. Riding down at an angle across the south valley he could see a bunch of armed men. A giant rode at their head, a huge figure on a great black horse.

"Blackjack Dugan," muttered Reese aloud. "He's made his connection with Salcedo."

Obeying Salcedo's warning signals, Dugan swung his men so they passed out of Reese's range of vision and gun. Reese heard the bandit chieftain and the big Dugan exchange greetings.

"We got a big job on, Vasco," growled Dugan. "A neat ambushin' party—"

HE broke off, evidently at Salcedo's whispered caution. "Who

yuh got in there?" demanded Blackjack.

"Eet ees range de-tec-tiff," replied Salcedo. "Señor Morgan say so. He shoot five of my hombres. *Si,* and I tear heem to leetle pee-ces weeth my own han's."

"What's he look like?" demanded Dugan.

Salcedo gave a quick description of Reese, and Blackjack bellowed, "Why, that's the dirty cattleman's spy I'm huntin', Vasco! Morgan and I got one of his pals, a roly-poly little coyote I caught snoopin' round my headquarters. Say, lemme at him. I'll—"

"No, no—he ees too good shot to rush," cried Salcedo, restraining the giant as Dugan bounded toward the springhouse. "He keel you pronto. Wait. We get heem when she's dark —have you any blast' powder weeth you, *amigo mio?"*

"I ain't," replied Dugan. "Can't yuh smoke him out, Vasco?"

"Fire she don't burn in water," shrugged Salcedo. "Maybe Panchito he come back soon. He ride after Señor Morgan to breeng powder to blow up springhouse."

It was a pleasant prospect to look forward to, thought Reese. He held himself in hand; there was but one thing he could do and that was wait for night. What Dugan had said shook him: "I've got one of his pals—" That was Dusty Trail, and the fat man must have fallen into their hands. And did Dugan mean he had killed Dusty, or captured him? It was about the same, feared Reese.

It seemed the dark would never fall. Enemies, savage, thirsting for his blood, surrounded him.

"Morgan," he muttered again. "Morgan. He seems to be very powerful with Salcedo and Dugan, too."

He would hunt up Morgan — if he ever had a chance to hunt up another criminal of the range.

Each time he heard a horse, or men shifting, it might be Panchito returning.

Yet the night fell with suddenness once the sun dropped back of the Western mountains. There was no moon yet; for an hour there would be only starlight—

Then he saw the red glow that waxed stronger: Salcedo and Dugan were igniting bonfires that illumined the area about the stone hut. Alert and armed hombres stalked the edges of this light circle.

"I'll never get out by land," muttered Reese.

He snugged his loaded pistol into its holster, clipped the strap, safe inside his coat. The firelight accentuated the dense shadow cast by the shack, by the low bank of the Lane.

"That's the only way," he told himself.

He had to act, act fast. The chance was narrow but he must take it . . . A horse trotted up outside.

"Panchito," cried Salcedo, in Spanish, "you have it, the powder?"

"*Si, si.*" Panchito added. "I had to ride a long way, to catch Señor Morgan, then go to his cache."

"Give it here. Now, Dugan, I show you how to blast fox out of hees hole."

STEVE REESE reached out a hand, picked up a rock from the water-covered floor of the springhouse. He approached the rear slit, and threw the rock as far as he could, so that it struck the bushes and rolled among the stones with a loud clatter.

"What the hell's that?" growled Blackjack Dugan.

All eyes swung inland, for the precious moment that Steve Reese needed. Flat on his belly he eased himself under water, down in the shadow of the muddy river bank. The liquid closed all around his body and he swam under the surface, the slight sounds he made lost in the rippling of the stream.

He held his breath till it seemed his lungs must burst; his ears drummed with suffused blood and pressure.

The current helped carry him; he was downstream, out toward the center, when finally nature forced him to rise, suck in a gasp of air. The faint splash he made in breaking the surface was heard by one of Salcedo's keen-eyed Mexicans, squatted on the bank. The bandit, eyes gleaming in the ruby-tinted night, came up on his feet, rifle barrel rising slowly. He peered at the dark waters, brought the gun to shoulder, muzzle aimed toward Reese.

"Who's that?" he called.

Reese once more ducked under. Salcedo yelled, "Juan—what is it?"

The raider replied, "Señor, I saw someone, out there in the water!"

"Shoot, idiot," bellowed Salcedo, jumping up and down on the bank.

A rifle bullet spanged on the water, ricocheted with a startling shriek, to the other bank, plunging into the mud.

The current was increasing its pace; here the river was nearing the narrow gorge which marked the western limit of the great Valley of Death. The banks rose higher, rockier. Reese, in the middle of the stream, looked back as he was borne along. Far behind he saw the red glow of the fires; and he heard a sudden explosion as flame belched up from the stone hut in which he had been besieged.

On the air ranged Salcedo's shriek of baffled fury: "Gone—he ees gone, Dugan! It was heem Juan saw in ze rivaire—we mus' catch heem—"

They came running, some mounting their horses, down both banks. The trees and bush along the river cast black shadows for which the range detective was grateful; the outlaws fired, wild and blind, at the water, trying to guess where he might be. On foot, even with the obstacles of rocks and brush, they could come faster than he was going.

He was cut off from landing on either bank; that had been his object, but he must stick to the water.

Salcedo had his black mustang; up on the brink of the rising bank, the sharp-eyed bandit chief glimpsed the bobbing head of the man in the water. A bullet spanged within a foot of the detective's moving head; he ducked under as a volley spattered wildly on the river.

THE current was picking up speed; it threw him violently against a high rock; he slid off, was turned over and over in the narrowing river. The water whitened to rapids, and the confused, dimming yells of his enemies came to his water-filled ears as he fought to control his body in the Lane.

But he was helpless against the force of it; he was swept at a mad pace down into the gorge where rock walls, while they protected him from the raiders, yet cut him off from any hope of effecting a landing.

Half stunned from repeated blows to his head from the rocks, gasping for a breath of air, fighting to keep his nose out of water now and then, Steve Reese hit the slippery rock slide at the extreme western tip of the Lane Valley. He struck a jagged rock that tore the flesh of his ribs and knocked what wind he had left out of him, and was picked up by the rapids in the lower gorge.

Salcedo and Dugan, with the army of gunmen strung out behind them, had been forced to detour around gigantic boulders and rough ravine banks; they were trying to get a shot at Reese but were too late in reaching a position. Their bullets went wild, reports booming up and down the canyon.

The range detective's long body rolled over and over; suddenly he felt the irresistible suction that drew him into the vortex. The Lane, dropping into the earth, took Reese with it.

A hoarse yell floated on the night air as his bobbing head dropped from sight:

"He's gone!"

CHAPTER X

Pig at the Trough

HANK BALL slept through what was left of the night, rolled up in a blanket outside the Lane house, in the encampment of Valley men. According to Reese's advice, armed guards patrolled the outskirts of the lighted camp, and roads and paths were closely watched.

Young Barney Olliphant disturbed him once, as the young fellow came quietly up, having finished his guard tour, and rolled up in a blanket near him.

"That young feller's happy, anyways," thought Ball as he fell back into the catlike sleep from which the slightest warning of danger would rouse him.

Set there to watch Judge Lane's life and the lives of his people, warned by Reese concerning the suspicious actions of the traitor who evidently was giving information to Blackjack Dugan, Hank Ball was up early, and ready to set about his job.

Barney Olliphant stirred as Ball sat up.

"Howdy," grunted Barney, sitting up to pull on his spurred boots.

"'Mornin'," replied Hank. In the daylight he looked Olliphant over and liked the capable set of the young man. Barney had the appearance of being handy in a fracas and, from what Reese had told him and what he had already experienced, Hank thought such a one might prove very welcome in the near future.

"Wonder where a feller kin git a bite of breakfast round these parts?" he asked.

"C'mon and I'll show yuh."

Olliphant rose up, and the two young fellows strolled together toward a community fire on which a great iron kettle sent forth an interesting and fetching aroma. They made a handsome pair of young devils, Ball with his flaming hair and mirthful, dark-blue eyes, a hundred-and-ninety pounds of fighting panther; and Olliphant, with great shoulders and blond curls.

Pausing at the cookfire, Barney said politely, "Slumgullion." He passed Hank a tin plate and a spoon from a box. "Dig in yoreownself."

"Much obliged."

There was also coffee, scalding hot from large pots kept on heated stones. A sprinkling of bachelors, cowboys who worked the cattle, and sons of the older generation, slouched around to tank up.

A man with a cast in one black eye, a sour-faced hombre, dark beard stubble on his chin, wearing dirty chaps and sweated blue shirt, strolled over. His lips were thick, sullen; wiry black hair, unbrushed, stuck out untidily from under his hat.

As he came past the two young men, his foot struck against Barney Olliphant's hand, spilling half his coffee from his cup—purposely, Hank Ball thought. However, Olliphant said nothing, though he did blink once.

"'Mornin', Mistuh Richards," said the negro cook, a quaver in his voice.

"Shut up," snarled Richards. "Dish me up some stew, damn' yore eyes."

REESE had described and named this man for Hank Ball. Will Richards, who had been so viciously inclined against Reese when the detective ruined the attempt on Judge

Lane's life, had been the man missing from the encampment, the man who had, Reese believed, ridden into town when he had overheard who Reese was. He was a traitor, a Judas to his people; pretending to be with them, yet against them.

Richards' hands were grimy, Hank saw, as he began to eat, sticking his

Barney Olliphant

big mouth down close to the plate.

"Practically laps it up, don't he?" said Hank aloud.

Olliphant nearly laughed. His eyes twinkled, his lips broke, but he managed to hide his grin. Evidently he wished to shun trouble while in the camp; he was a stranger there.

Richards turned baleful eyes on Hank Ball and Barney. He had caught the redhead's tone, guessed Hank had made some cunning remark about him.

"Huh? What's that?" he growled.

Six-shooters rested on the blunt hips, hided in scratched chaps of thick leather; he had enormous feet, and hands to match.

"Who, me?" asked Hank Ball innocently. "I just said to Barney that one ranch I worked on used to keep pigs."

"What of it, lots of 'em do," snapped Richards.

"Yeah, but they usually have troughs for 'em to eat out of."

"Meanin'—" demanded Richards. His right hand, gripping the tin spoon from an overhead stance, thumb running down the handle toward the dish, paused; it stopped within an inch of the six-gun thonged at his bent hip.

"Why, we was just havin' a little talk," answered Ball.

Will Richards grunted in contempt, shrugged, turned away.

"He knowed I rode in with Reese, so what's the diff?" thought Hank.

One happy man was Barney Olliphant. Every move he made, every word he spoke, attested it. Hank, though he looked like a waddy in off the range, was a keen judge of human nature. He realized that Olliphant, from the way he kept looking around, was watching for someone and was not surprised that it was Miss June Lane. She appeared later in a fresh print dress, and smiled out at them from her father's doorway. Barney rose quickly and strode over to her.

"In love," thought Hank. "And bad. However, I don't know as I blame him much. If Doc didn't keep me so busy I b'lieve I'd try to cut him out."

A guttural, low curse caught his attention. That was Will Richards. A red flush had come up under the suspected traitor's dirty-skinned cheeks, as he stared over at Barney and June.

"It ain't possible he could hope to win such a gal hisself," thought Hank.

BUT he had to conclude it was. Richards was plainly a man of ambition. No doubt he was jealous of Judge Lane's authority and honed to be recognized as a big gun himself.

Reese had told only Hank of Richards' perfidy; the range detectives had decided to give the spy rope, perhaps gain more valuable information by watching him. Richards, thought Ball, seemed to be feared rather than liked by his friends, though he had some importance in the community.

Men were saddling up and setting out southwest to take over the herds of cattle; soon the night shift, relieved, would ride wearily in for food and sleep.

The Lane Valley people had, so far as possible, resumed their way of life. Women cooked up food for their children and men; there was a school tent for the kids, and the little ones played around underfoot while their mothers went down to the brook to do the washing, or swept out shacks and tents. The men gathered in knots, either working at harness mending or whittling; others repaired tools, or created rough implements. A camp butcher was busy cutting up a steer for distribution to various cookfires.

But over it all hung the pall of despair and terror which had uprooted these people from their homeland.

Slouched in the shade of the Lane house, a cigarette twirling blue smoke from between his lean, strong fingers, red-headed Henry Hanscombe Ball idly eyed the camp. Judge Lane was seated outside, talking with a number of his cronies, elder men of the group. Off to one side, under a tree, Barney Olliphant sat on a wooden bench besides smiling June Lane, who was sewing.

Olliphant looked like a man whose dream has come true—and it had, though Hank Ball didn't yet know the cowpuncher's story. Barney, sorry as he was for the plight of the Lane Valley folk knew that the fact that Judge Lane had grown poor overnight had brought the woman he loved to him; he felt he was in a position to help her, shield her. It was an ill wind that blew nobody any good.

Hank Ball would not have suspected Will Richards, had it not been for Reese's keen powers of observation and diagnosis. He would have had no way of guessing the man was a spy, a traitor; and Barney Olliphant's dream would have been rudely shattered that day.

As it was, the trail guard let through a little Mexican lad who came to sell a basket of fruit. Hank, who seldom missed anything, noticed that Will Richards seemed interested in the boy. As soon as he could, Richards caught the Mexican's eye; the kid slouched over and offered his basket. Richards reached quickly in.

"Funniest lookin' fruit I ever seen," thought Ball. "Looked like paper to me!"

Intrigued, he saw Richards glance around, keeping the paper cupped in his big hand; the spy retired behind a tent where he hastily read the missive.

HE came striding toward the Lane house. Hank slouched closer, feigning to be interested in rolling a fresh cigarette. He heard Richards say:

"Jedge, I callate it'd be a good plan to brand up a few of them spring calves today. T'won't take long. Gimme a man to tie and hold and I'll see to it."

"Okay, Will," Lane replied carelessly.

"I'll take that young gent, he ain't busy," announced Richards. He cocked a thumb in Barney Olliphant's general direction; the Judge was not noticing, simply nodded.

Richards swung and went to stand behind Olliphant. A twisted grin was on his thick lips. June raised her pretty eyes but she looked quickly down—it was plain that she could hardly conceal her dislike for the man.

"Say, Olliphant, I need a man to help me brand some calves. The Jedge

says yuh'd be willin'. Git yore hoss."

"Okay," Barney told him easily, getting up. He was anxious to do anything he could for June's people. Olliphant's long strides took him to the corral where his saddle hung on the top rail; his paint horse came at his whistle, and he cinched up, mounted. Richards swung in beside him as he started off, and they cantered out of camp together, heading along the south trail.

CHAPTER XI

The Message

"I DON'T like the look in that rapscallion's eye," mused Hank Ball, as he watched the two men jog over the first rise and drop out of sight on the bushed road. "Sorta like a snake gittin' ready to take a bite outa a victim. Now I wish I knowed what that note says that rattled him so."

From what Hank's quick blue eyes had taken in, Will Richards, the spy, hated Barney Olliphant. A hunch too strong to forget made Hank restless. And, after all, he was interested in observing Richards.

An inquiry informed him that the Lane Valley herd was being held southwest, between the road south and the desert country; you followed the main trail for two miles and then cut west to reach the spot.

The Mexican kid seemed to have lost interest in his fruit selling; he didn't hang around long, but got his docile, sleepy-eyed mule on which he had ridden from Carville and started back toward town.

Hank Ball threw his noose over a fast, rawboned grey with a wicked eye, and lined out. He caught up with the young peon quickly. The lad turned dark eyes rolling with fear up to the tall waddy's face as the redhead pulled up, the grey dancing in front of the mule. His red tongue licked at his upper lip as Ball waved a ten-dollar bill under his nose.

"Didn't Blackjack Dugan give yuh a letter for me, sonny?" he asked.

The black eyes flickered; the boy shook his head. "No, señor."

"Huh. He should have. I reckon I better ride after Señor Richards and ask him what the boss says."

The muchacho nodded. "Si. Señor Dugan gave me but one letter."

Ball said, *"Adios,"* rode on, his suspicion confirmed. The dust raised by the hoofs of the two horses ahead still hung in the warm air; it tickled Hank's nostrils, slowly settling back to earth to wait until the next passers-by disturbed it. Undoubtedly, thought Hank as he shoved the long-pacing grey on, Dugan had sent his spy an order, perhaps a warning. Hank could think of only one reason why Richards would take Barney Olliphant with him.

"He's got his mind set on that girl," he murmured. "Barney's spiked his play."

The trail, through the chaparral and mesquite, ran up and down across the undulations of the land between the hills. The aromatic odor of creosote and sage, the sweet perfume of waxy white blossoms made breathing a delight. Butterflies and insects flitted over the blooms, drinking of their nectar; a jackrabbit kicked up white heels and stubby tail, dashed in and out parallel with the road as though racing the grey mustang.

The dust informed Hank Ball of the progress of the two ahead; he hung back for a while but then closed up distance. He reached the turn-off leading to the grazing pastures westward; here Richards and Olliphant

Stopping the front end of the gap, a knot of Salcedo's raiders were grouped behind rock shelter (Chap. XIV)

had left the Carville road, the dust told him.

NOT far along, the hills rose and the track cut through them. For some hundreds of yards it was confined by precipitous red-clay walls; he could not see any distance into the gully and he was getting worried. He did not enter the trap ahead; it was, his experienced eye noted, a perfect spot for an ambush.

"Let's git up above and have a look-see," he muttered to the grey and spurred up a steep slope. Pebbles slid under the bronc's digging hoofs, the horse leaned far forward in his effort to make the grade. It brought Hank to a sharp elevation from which he could peer down, see Olliphant and Richards moving below.

Richards had evidently let Olliphant precede him into the Gully. The ugly hombre seemed in no hurry; the pace was slow, and even at the distance from which he peered Hank Ball could see the gleam of the traitor's teeth. Richards rode three paces behind Barney; now and then Olliphant would swing in his leather, make some remark to Richards.

"I shore don't like the set of that Richards sidewinder," grunted Hank. Hank's red hair gleamed under the jauntily cocked Stetson as he eased the grey along up above them.

Hank thoughtfully unshipped the Winchester from the boot, his big hands making sure it was ready. For Richards had almost stopped, as they came to a cul-de-sac where the trail made a sharp turn, and the spot was hidden from both directions.

"There he goes—I was right," he growled.

Richards' hand dropped to his Colt revolver; he drew and took deliberate aim at Barney Olliphant's spine, pointblank.

Ball threw the rifle to his shoulder; there was no time to stop the grey's motion. The gun kicked back and, as he corrected his sighting, he let a second one loose. Richards' pistol had emitted a spurt of smoke. Hank heard the explosion banging in the confined spaces, sandwiched between his own two shots.

Olliphant fell sideways in his saddle; he righted himself, whirled his paint horse around; the paint horse was madly excited by the shots, and reared up on his hind legs, mouth slathering with foam as Barney fought him. The big waddy brought his fist down between his mustang's flattened ears, knocking him into running position. The paint horse lined out, jumping as he ran, springs in his legs. Handling the animal kept Olliphant fully occupied.

Hank Ball turned and hurried down toward the spot where Will Richards, betrayer of his friends, lay in the trail. His horse had thrown him off. The animal's first mad leap after Hank Ball's shots, had left its rider there, doubled up on the fine red powdery floor of the path. The beast flashed past Hank as he entered the Gully from the east end and spurred up to Richards.

Ball dismounted, knelt beside Will Richards; the hombre was dead, yellowed teeth clenched, eyes rolled back in his head. He was still squatted there when Barney Olliphant, getting control of his excited horse, came trotting back around the curve.

"What the hell did yuh do that for, Hank?" demanded Barney.

A hand rested on his gun butt; he watched Hank Ball with suspicion burning his gaze. "Yuh shot him, didn't yuh! Is he daid?"

"Reckon so," drawled Hank. "Leastways, he's quit breathin', Olliphant."

ONE of Ball's slugs had passed through Richards from side to side, pierced his lungs; the second had struck him in the head, killing him.

"Why 'd yuh do it?" insisted Olliphant. "I never did like Will Richards; but Jedge Lane told me him and Richards' father prospected the Valley in their young days. This 'll make the Jedge feel mighty bad; and there's people who set a lot of stock in Richards."

Hank Ball had what he wanted from Will Richards' pockets: the dirty paper the Mexican boy had passed to Richards that day. He pointed to the blood which was making a sodden mess of Olliphant's pants.

"That would have been right through yore spine, Barney, if I hadn't let Richards have it when I did. He meant to murder yuh."

Barney stared at the blood, also at the splotch on his paint horse. Richards' bullet, aim ruined by Ball's first shot, had struck Barney and then nicked the mustang, which was why the paint horse had gone crazy.

"Mebbe so," grunted Olliphant. He didn't savvy the play. "But why should he want to kill me? I never done anything to him."

"No?" Hank Ball was unfolding the stained bit of paper he had extracted from Richards' vest pocket. He scanned it quickly, saying as he began, "Yuh're a pretty fast worker, Barney—lucky, too. That little lady's a peach."

A brick-red flush came up under the young fellow's fair skin; he bit his lip. Reticent and shy, he resented Hank's pointed allusion to June Lane. Hank Ball raised his dark-blue eyes to meet the waddy's; usually his eyes danced with mirth as though contemplating a secret jest but now they held Olliphant's man-to-man, serious and strong.

"I said that 'bout Miss Lane a-purpose, Barney," Ball told him carefully, "for that's the reason Richards hated yore guts. He hoped to git Miss Lane hisself. Yore makin' sich fast progress riled him; that's why he tried to drygulch yuh jist now—"

He was already looking back at the hurried pencil scrawl of the note he had taken off Will Richards.

The involuntary curse that issued from Ball's tight lips made Olliphant demand, "What's wrong?"

Hank Ball straightened up to his full height; it was plain to Olliphant that the redhead was perturbed over that letter, although Ball was not a man who easily betrayed his feelings.

"Read this—but make it snappy," growled Ball.

He was checking the two deadly Colt revolvers in their cutaway holsters. He fired his small-arms by thumb-fanning; the trigger dogs had been filed so the hammers did the work.

Barney Olliphant read the note, mouthing the words out loud; he was still greatly excited at Richards' sudden demise. He wondered what he could say to June and the Judge.

The note read:

Run for it—they suspishun yu. We got wun of them at the barn and wil get uthers. Kin use yu in town here.—D.

BARNEY scratched his curly blond head. "I don't savvy. What's this mean?" he asked.

"That note was delivered secret-like to Richards, jist 'fore he drew yuh out here to kill yuh. He figgered on puttin' yuh outa the way so's to make shore June Lane 'd be there when he was ready for her. He hoped to win June, onct his pals—among 'em Blackjack Dugan of Carville—had finished their dirty game."

Barney had heard tell of Blackjack Dugan; the giant gambler had an unsavory reputation in those parts. When he had ridden the Diamond L range two years before, Olliphant had come close to a gun fight with the big fellow over a matter of loaded dice at the Oriental.

Ball was mounted, swinging the grey. "Where yuh haidin'?" demanded Barney.

"Carville, Barney." Hank took the note, stuffed it in a pocket. "Yuh read what Dugan says, 'We got one of 'em—at the barn'—" He was shoving his rifle hastily into its holster. Doc Reese had mentioned Dugan's barn, the night Dusty and he arrived.

Olliphant's face was a study. "Dugan's against Lane—Richards worked for Dugan—and I guess Dugan's meanin' is that he's captured a friend of yores, is that it?"

"That's it," the redhead's tight lips replied. "And my friend's name is Dusty Trail. *Adios.*"

"Wait—I'll go with yuh."

Barney didn't voice it but Hank Ball knew what he meant: that Hank had saved his life and he would fight with Ball in order to return some of what Ball had done for him.

"Yuh'll hafta ride fast," warned Ball, sticking in his spurs. But he was secretly pleased to have Olliphant coming along. Dugan had a large gang.

The two horses rapidly picked up speed, the wind whistling madly past the riders' ears, threatening to lift the Stetsons, secured by chinstraps, from their heads. The paint horse was fast

and carried Barney's weight well. The wound was but a scratch on his handsome hide, and he was excited, ready to open up.

They whirled, reckless of stones and holes, back to the Carville Trail, turned into it, and headed south at breakneck pace. Sparks flashed as the shod hoofs struck flinty rocks; the dust beat up in a billowing column behind.

They rode on and on, Ball never letting up the pace he had set; the rangy grey justified Hank's expert eye in picking him from the Lane string of mustangs; he had long legs that practically flew. The blood pounding under the red hair kept repeating, in cadence with the beat of the mustang's hoofs, "Is he daid yit—is he daid yit?" —Dugan had Dusty Trail.

The miles slid behind them. They came to the spot where Ball and Reese had taken care of Dugan's dry gulchers.

Whatever happened, Hank Ball meant to have a showdown with Blackjack Dugan in Carville; there was no time for subtlety now, seconds were precious. If Dugan tried to stop him from hunting for Dusty Trail, then either Dugan or Hank Ball would never rise again.

CHAPTER XII

The Fight at Dugan's Barn

THE sun was lowering in the sky when they saw the town in the flats below. Far off in the east distance hung a black smoke column marking the progress of the huckleberry train; it was still many miles away, heading toward Carville in its leisurely, jerky fashion, stopping for long periods to unload freight and passengers.

Dust covered the two young men as they whirled into Main Street. Hank Ball pulled up to a sliding stop outside the sheriff's office and jail, hit the stone stoop in a running jump, leaving the heaving, lather-bathed grey outside.

Sheriff Borden leaped to his feet, so fast he upset his chair, and he was reaching for the double-barreled shotgun almost before Hank landed inside. The squat, red-faced officer stared for a moment at Ball before he recognized him and started to replace the shotgun on the desk.

"Keep it, Sheriff," Hank ordered.

"What the hell's the idee of scarin' me thataway?" growled Borden. "I thought somebuddy was after me shore!"

The alligator hide of his face was redder than usual from the startling entrance of Hank Ball; his handlebar mustache twitched.

"Dugan's hangout's in that red barn behind the Oriental, ain't it?" asked Ball. "Accordin' to this note I took off'n Dugan's spy—it's signed 'D' and I figger it's Blackjack—they got my pardner Dusty Trail in that barn. Or did have, if he ain't been finished and throwed in the monte somewheres."

Borden swore, even as he dropped shotgun shells in his pockets.

"Wondered what had happened to that roly-poly. Reckoned he'd trailed off somewheres after Dugan. Blackjack rode outa here this mornin' with a bunch of men; there's a dozen or so left at the barn, I guess. I hope we find yore pal; I'd like to git Dugan with the goods on him."

"It's the fust place to look, that barn," declared Ball. He was starting for the door. Olliphant sat his paint horse, soothing the animal with a gentle hand.

"I better round up some depitties," growled Borden, trying to keep up

with Hank's long strides. "Yeah, that's Dugan's barn, the red one. Yuh kin see it between the Golden Steer and the Oriental."

"Call yore men, if yuh want," shrugged Hank. "I'm goin' to try that barn right now. We'll know from the way the hombres in it act if they got pore Dusty or not."

Borden gave three shrill whistles. A couple of lanky young fellows, wearing deputy badges, emerged quickly from saloons and ran to meet them as they headed between the Oriental and Golden Steer that led to Tin Can Alley and Dugan's barn. Olliphant left his horse at a hitchrail and joined them, as the five broke into the alley.

"That's the place," growled Borden, pointing to the blanket-covered doorway. It seemed deserted.

"Spread out, case of trouble," warned the sheriff.

Hank Ball's lean fighting jaw was set, stuck out; his dark-blue eyes glowed with suppressed fury. Broad shoulders drooped in gunfighter's attitude, his strong hands swung loose at his rolling hips as he strode to the barn.

BARNEY OLLIPHANT was at Ball's right; he walked erect, easily, a hand on his pistol butt, thumb cocked on hammer spur. His eyes were straight ahead. He would leave it to Hank, to open any fight that might crop up. After all, it was the redhead's play.

Sheriff Borden gripped his sawed-off shotgun fondly in both hands, muzzles up as he advanced, taking two short ones to every long stride of Hank Ball. He was at Hank's left and the deputies filled out the wings.

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Hank Ball thumped with his fist on the side of the barn, close to the blanket. A harsh voice demanded from inside:

"What you fellers want?"

"I want Dusty Trail, the little fat hombre yuh got in there," Ball snarled. "We're comin' in."

The unseen hombre said, "Hello, Borden—say, what the hell's the idee, comin' here thisaway?"

Ball answered for the sheriff. "I told yuh. Will yuh pass Trail out or do we come in and git him."

The five heard low whisperings as the men Dugan had left on guard talked it over, evidently at a loss as to what they should do. Then Dugan's lieutenant growled, "Yuh're wrong, mister. We ain't seen anybuddy like yuh want."

Ball's suspicion was practically confirmed; if they didn't have Dusty in there, they wouldn't be so touchy.

"Then it won't hurt to let us have a look-see," he snapped.

"Yuh can't come in. This is private."

Hank's left hand gripped the horse blanket; it was firmly nailed to its moorings but he ripped it aside with one sweep of a strong arm.

Just inside the entrance stood a bunch of men; they were all armed, most of them had cocked revolvers already in their hands. It was obvious they would fight before they let the posse search through the barn; Dugan had left those orders.

A tall rascal with black chaps and a jutting jaw snarled, "Stand back or we'll give it to yuh—"

Hank Ball jumped into the barn. His two guns appeared as though by legerdemain. He used a deadly thumb roll that threw lead twice as fast as most men could.

Ball's leap took him right into the midst of the enemy. The big man in the black chaps swore as he tried to turn his gun muzzle against Ball's ribs; he was first to go down, taking one through the belly, and his shot kicked up splinters from the floor. A blast of bullets whirled from the bunched gunmen; they were ready to fight rather than allow Ball and the sheriff to search the red barn.

Hank Ball's left arm cut a swathe along the row of twisted, furious faces opposing him; he burst right on through the lines as Sheriff Borden let off both barrels of his shotgun. The wads had no room to spread, but drove through one man and, ripping him wide open, wounded a second.

Barney Olliphant and the deputies were in, stabbing with sharp gun muzzles, firing at individual opponents; the dozen gunmen, reduced to eight in the first rounds of the terrible close-up battle, paused in shock. Three of them were lined up, one behind the other, right before Hank Ball.

AS Borden ducked to bring new shells for the shotgun from a pocket and shove them into the smoking breech, the Dugan men fired a volley and the sheriff took one between the eyes; he crumpled in a heap on the uneven, rubble-strewn floor.

A fresh bloody groove appeared along Hank Ball's cheek, sent by a hard-eyed raider crouched behind a stall. Hank, seeing Borden go down out of the corner of one eye, realized the shot that had finished the sheriff had come from the front man of the three lined before him. He aimed straight at the hombre's belly, and it was like stringing fish. The first and second went down and the third staggered as the bullet bit his thigh.

Explosions deafened all in the barn. Hank, in the tenseness of the fight, hardly realized he was wounded, bullets tearing his skin, and ripping through his clothes. The hombre behind the stall was doing a lot of this, and Hank whirled, seized the edge of the stall and vaulted over, landing

with spurred feet on the gunman below. His furious, kicking boot drove the gun from the man's grip; his other toe, coming through, kicked the fellow's teeth into his throat, and a slash from a gun barrel laid him out cold.

The cries, the shooting in that confined space, made it impossible to distinguish voices. Confused bellowings of wounded, profanity of hot-blooded gunfighters, echoed through the building.

Like a huge wildcat, the red-haired Hank Ball raged up and down the barn, hunting out gunman after gunman who sought a hiding-place from which to shoot. Borden was dead; one of his deputies had a useless right arm but was shooting bravely with his left hand; the second deputy had a dozen bleeding flesh wounds. Barney Olliphant teetered on his feet, reeled when he tried to move, but he was still firing.

Freshly loaded guns in hand, Hank Ball rolled them with his thumbs.

The whole battle lasted only about a minute and a half, although it seemed endless to the men enduring it. Eight of Dugan's guards lay there on the boards where they had gone down. The last four, appalled at the terrific fighting ability of the redhead and his mates, turned to run. Two dived out windows; the other pair headed for a back exit. Hank brought down one of the latter with a shot in the leg, and the other made the door.

Silence descended over the scene.

Gasping for breath, the red-headed devil stood an instant, staring at the destruction. Powder smoke hung thick in the dimly-lit chamber. The wounded started groaning with anguish as the anesthesia of shock wore off and shattered nerves began to complain.

"Dusty!" called Ball hoarsely.

There was no reply.

Hank swore. His long legs took him through the lower part of the barn, now emptied of opponents. Outside, the three who had escaped with their lives had ducked for cover, were seeking horses on which to escape the town and the wrath of Hank Ball.

IN a back room, Hank saw a man lying in a pile of straw, covered with a blanket, the white triangle of the face turned toward him in the gloom of the windowless chamber.

"That you, Dusty?" he growled.

The hombre shifted, weakly cursed him. It wasn't Dusty Trail but one of Dugan's wolfish desperadoes, pale under his sallow skin; it was Martie, though Hank Ball had no way of knowing this was a raider his friend Reese had seriously wounded in the bush outside Lane's camp when Reese had saved the Judge from death at the hands of the drygulch party of Blackjack Dugan.

"Have yuh seen a short, fat feller, named Trail, in here?" demanded Hank.

The rasping breath of Martie was uneven; he gasped: "Go to hell—lemme be—damn' yuh!"

It was plain to Hank that this man was so badly hurt he couldn't move or do any harm. Hank shrugged; he could not bother such an injured person. He went over, climbed a ladder that led up to the hayloft.

Dusty Trail lay there in a rear corner. Ball's heart leaped with joy at first sight of his roly-poly friend. Dusty was trussed up like a sore thumb. Ropes held him doubled up, hands and ankles fastened together; a dirty bandanna had been stuffed in his mouth and tied in position as a gag.

Ball quickly cut the cords, took out the stuffing.

"Dusty, boy," he growled, shaking Trail as he knelt by him, but Dusty never stirred.

A cold sweat came out on Hank's bloody brow; he thought Dusty was

dead for a moment, but he felt a faint heart-beat. Ball scooped the short man up in his arms; Dusty was as limp as a bag of old rags. Hank carried him to the mow door, kicked it open, letting in light; he swore with anxiety as he saw the condition of Dusty's face; it was covered with long, scabbed-over scars, and Hank Ball had handled too many freshly branded calves not to realize what had made those marks.

"Tortured him with a hot iron," he muttered.

Dusty's clothing was badly torn; through the rips Hank saw he had been kicked and beaten black-and-blue. He was totally out, in bad condition; tied up so long, his muscles were cramped.

Hank hung the roly-poly Trail over one shoulder and carried him down the ladder to the ground floor.

He paused up front, to stare at the scene of carnage. Dead men lay where they had crashed; a wounded man had got up on hands and knees, crawled almost to the open doorway before collapsing on his face. Sheriff Borden was a lifless heap. Barney Olliphant leaned in a corner, a dazed expression on his young face; he was still holding his pistol, but as though he didn't know what to do with it. One deputy sat with back to the wall; staring straight ahead, and talking to himself about something; the second was cursing a blue streak as he sought to stop the bleeding of a jagged wound over his ribs.

"TICKLES like blazes," he growled, to prevent himself from sobbing. "Borden's daid, Mister. Where do we go from here? Been a pleasant afternoon."

"I'm takin' my pal to the doctor," Ball told him. "See to cleanin' up here, depitty."

"Okay," the deputy replied simply.

Barney Olliphant seemed to come back to himself, at sound of Ball's voice. He wiped blood from his eyes with the back of a big hand, heaved a deep sigh and, head down, staggered, limping badly, in Hank Ball's wake.

Outside, the sky was blood red.

There was a sawbones down the road, his sign creaking in the evening breeze. Ball toted Dusty Trail there, the roly-poly a dead weight in his powerful arms. Hank didn't ask for help; he was taking care of his pal.

The doctor spread Dusty out and it took him a long time to find all of Trail's injuries.

At last he looked up, shook his head. "I dunno why he ain't dead," he said to Hank. "Anybuddy else would be."

Hope sprang in Hank's pounding heart. "Aw, yuh can't kill a rascal like him, Doc." He took a wad of money from his pants, shoved it into the physician's hands. "Patch him up, best of ev'rything. Anything it costs I'll pay. Be back in a jiffy."

He had to have a drink; Barney was waiting for him, sitting on the doctor's stoop with his face in his hands.

"What'd he say?" Olliphant muttered.

"He'll live."

Ball stared at the big waddy, at the blood and wounds. "Now looka here. C'mon, we'll thrown down a couple drinks. Then yuh have the doc bandage yuh up, and yuh kin ride back to Lane's. I'm s'posed to keep an eye on the Jedge, savvy? And Dugan's out, with most of his gang; they might be headin' there."

Olliphant nodded. "I'll go," he said.

A while later Olliphant, head drooped on his great chest, headed the paint horse north out of town.

Hank Ball couldn't see Dusty that night; he was asleep, the doctor told him, and couldn't be disturbed.

The redhead was up at dawn; eagerly he went around to the doctor's, woke the household up with his knocking.

"He's a lot better," the yawning physician told him. "You can see him if you wish, only don't talk long, understand?"

Hank softly opened the door of the room where Dusty Trail was. Dusty was sitting on the edge of the bed, chin in hands. He raised bleary eyes to his friend.

"Lie down, yuh consarned jackass," the startled Ball ordered.

Light flashed in Dusty's eyes.

"Hank—Dugan got me—tortured me—he was keepin' me 'cause I made him b'lieve I knowed—a lot—that's why I ain't altogether daid—only some—"

TRAIL paused for breath. "Will yuh lay down?" Hank begged, trying to push him back into bed.

Dusty lay down but only stayed there a moment; he swore wildly, coming up on his elbows:

"I remember what I was tryin' to remember—I heard 'em talkin' some. The chief of the hull bus'ness is named Morgan. Blackjack Dugan works fer him. Blackjack and most of his killers done rode to meet a Mex named Salcedo — they're ambushin' the Lane Valley people at the Gully—what the hell time is it?"

"'Bout six o'clock."

"No, damn yuh, I mean what day?" Trail demanded.

"Thursday."

Dusty swore faintly; his eyelids were drooping. He made a valiant effort to fight off the awful weakness that had him. "That's—today—they'll—ambush this mornin'—got to save—too late—"

Hank Ball caught him as he collapsed. The redhead made him as comfortable as he could, then turned and swung quickly out. If Dugan and the Mexican bandit Salcedo caught the Lane folk in that Gully—

"It's a swell place for an ambush," Hank Ball muttered.

CHAPTER XIII

Toward Death

MORE dead than alive, Barney Olliphant, forced to ride very slowly, arrived at the Lane Valley encampment in the small hours of the morning, shortly before Hank Ball heard from Dusty Trail the news of the proposed ambush at the Gully.

His wounds had stiffened and he could hardly hold his eyes open. A sentry on the trail, out from the camp, stuck a rifle into his face and challenged him.

"Howdy, Lewis," Olliphant muttered. "I'm plumb wore out. Had a fight."

"Git down off that hoss," Lewis growled, "and keep yore paws away from yore guns, savvy?"

Olliphant jerked erect at the menacing threat in the rancher's voice. Lewis was a cleancut hombre, with a severe mouth and piercing black eyes; Olliphant knew him as a friend of Judge Lane's and a decent citizen. Lewis had always seemed to like Barney, till now. He was plainly on his ear over something.

"What's bitin' yuh?" Barney demanded.

"Git down," snapped Lewis. The trigger of the rifle was at full cock, and there was an icy note in the rancher's voice that told Barney he'd better obey.

He left his paint horse, and went, stiffly, along the trail toward camp, Lewis riding behind him, prodding him on.

A red fire lit the clearing; there were sentries set all around, and spare

men dozing in a circle around the fire, ready to leap to arms at any alarm.

"Here he is," Lewis called. "Caught him on the trail, boys."

"Caught me?" Barney cried. "Why, I was ridin' back—"

A man shoved him in the ribs. The Judge's cabin was dark; June and her father would be asleep.

"Shall we git it over with?" Lewis asked.

"Now is as good as any time," another rancher said.

But the others didn't seem to agree. "Better wait'll the Jedge rouses. He mightn't like us doin' it without him."

"What?" Olliphant asked, bewildered. "What have I done, gents?"

Lewis laughed, a short, unpleasant laugh.

"Nobuddy knows better'n yuh do, Olliphant. Yuh pretended yuh wanted to help us out and then yuh murdered Will Richards. We picked up his body where yuh left it, at the Gully."

A light burst on Barney; it was suddenly clear to him why the Lane men treated him so strangely; they thought he had murdered Richards in cold blood. Of course they didn't know about Richards' perfidy.

He tried to tell them.

"Looka here, gents, Richards was a traitor. He sold out to Blackjack Dugan."

They hardly heard what he said; didn't wish to. Their minds were made up and set, and anything a killer claimed must be a lie.

"It ain't logical," Lewis growled. "Why should Richards have worked for Dugan? There wouldn't be no point to it. What would he do?"

They took away Barney's gun, tied his hands, and pushed him into a small shed, which had a hasp and padlock on the door.

BARNEY was too weary to palaver. He shrugged. When Hank Ball came back, the redhead would show them the note, clear him. It was silly. He threw himself down in a pile of hay in one corner and was asleep almost before his head hit.

He awoke with a start, stiff as a board. The sun was up, yellow in the sky, and the door was opening. Judge Samuel Bowie Lane stared in at him.

"I dunno why yuh done it, Olliphant," the old man said sadly, "but it was a cruel play. What had yuh against Will? Pore chap, he had lost all his money, even 'fore we lost our Valley home. But his father was a good man. We rode the river together in the old days. Will liked to gamble, but lately he was allus travelin' from one house to another, helpin' out—"

"Jedge," Barney said earnestly, standing up. "I didn't kill Richards. If I had, he'd 've deserved it."

He was anxiously looking past Lane, hoping to see June, but she wasn't in sight. Didn't she care enough, he asked himself.

"We'll hafta decide what to do with yuh," Lane went on miserably. "Most of 'em want to hang yuh. I s'pose yuh were jealous of Will, mebbe 'bout my girl?"

"Does June believe that?" growled Olliphant.

"That's what ev'rybody's sayin'. Well—we'll see—"

He broke off. The shouts of men, the galloping hoofs of an approaching horse from the north, interrupted the Judge, and he stepped outside to see who was coming.

"It's Dr. Prentiss," he said. "I'll see to yuh later, Olliphant." He snapped the padlock and hurried toward the scientist.

Curious, smarting at the unjust charge against him, Barney went to the small window at the end of the hut. He could look out, see the Lane shack and the settlement between.

Judge Lane helped Charles Prentiss to dismount. The scientist was badly hurt; he could scarcely stand

alone. Barney saw the bloody wound in his left cheek. Prentiss's eyes were frightened, he staggered weakly, caught at assisting arms. The Easterner's once neat corduroy suit was spattered with mud and blood; he was plainly very much shaken.

He wiped sweat and dirt from his face with the back of his arm. "I've been attacked, Judge," he gasped. "A band of Mexicans in the Valley opened fire on me. They had someone treed down below and the shooting brought me out; when I rode to see what was wrong, they chased me and wounded me. I managed to get out of the Valley, and hid in the chaparral. I believe they burned up my shack and all my chemicals and supplies with it. I saw a fire up that way."

THE Judge was upset; he ordered warm water and dressings for the Easterner's wound, hot food and coffee. Not till the distressed man was as comfortable as he could be made, did Lane allow himself to question him concerning the vital matter of the Valley.

"Don't s'pose yuh've had time to find anything more 'bout the Valley?" he inquired anxiously.

"I discovered a good bit of loco weed, a new growth of deadly nightshade and, I fear, an arsenic deposit which has recently opened up. Rains may wash it down into your soil. I haven't had a chance to make any postmortems."

Prentiss was very nervous, hands shaking as he spoke; he was distraught, kept gingerly feeling at the wound in his cheek. "Really, Judge Lane, I'm afraid my nerve's broken. I simply can't go back into that Valley after what's happened. I'm convinced someone came to my shack while I was out and tried to poison me; I told you of that. And now, this terrible attack."

"Yuh ain't quittin' on us, are yuh, Doctor?"

"I don't see how I can go on. At least, not till you can guarantee I won't be murdered any instant. I come from a place where law and order prevail. I'm afraid I'll have to go back home and collect myself. Perhaps later—" Prentiss was badly shaken. "I'm not used to such violence," he apologized.

"I'll send some men over to chase them Mexes, if yuh'll stay," offered Lane.

Prentiss shook his head. "It won't do any good now. All my equipment has been ruined, if they've burned my hut which I'm sure they did. The smoke came from right over it. I'm so nervous I can't work. You'll have to let me collect myself, Judge. I'll try to return in a week or two."

Olliphant heard the yells from the south trail. Shots rang out as well, warning shots.

Prentiss leaped to his feet, eyes frightened. "What's that?" he cried. "I—I can't stand any more of this, Judge Lane. I want a fresh horse—I'll catch the first train home—"

Lane was sadly discouraged. His last hope seemed to have failed him; he had counted heavily on Dr. Prentiss discovering the cause of the Valley trouble. And now, Prentiss had been violently driven out.

Again the shots sounded—three spaced one after the other. It was a distress signal, common to the western plains. The Lane Valley men hurried to gather at the south end of the camp.

Four cowboys swept in off the trail. They belonged to the day shift which had been overseeing the Lane Valley herds. Ten had ridden forth but only the four returned, and two were wounded, blood on clothes and leather.

One in the van, Shorty Curns, bellowed as he whirled to a stop in a cloud of dust.

"C'mon, boys—Salcedo's gang jist hit us and they're drivin' off our herds! They kilt Tony, Jeff and the Green boys. We couldn't hold 'em. There was fifty or sixty of them greasers. They're drivin' the cows south along the rim of the desert but we kin ketch 'em if we hustle."

EVEN before Shorty finished his speech, action had begun. Men ran for the corrals, grabbing up saddles and strapping on gunbelts, picking up rifles. The Lane Valley men had been riding under a terrible strain for weeks, and here, at last, was a tangible enemy they might fight.

Judge Lane would go with his fighters. The old fellow ran to the corral, slapped his hull on a horse, determined to fight with his people as he always had. Most of the able-bodied men in the camp made ready to take the trail of Vasco Salcedo's raiders.

"Jedge—Jedge!"

Lane turned impatiently, to see Barney Olliphant looking out the tiny window in his hut. "Lemme go along with yuh," begged Barney.

The Judge shook his silvered head, threw a leg over his saddle.

"C'mon, boys, up and at 'em," he shouted.

A few who had to remain to guard the camp watched with envious eyes the sweeping start of the fighters as they lined out on the south trail.

Though they did not know it, the Lane Valley men were heading for certain death in the Gully.

CHAPTER XIV

The Gully

OLLIPHANT watched them disappear; when he turned away, disconsolately, he saw that June Lane had finally come from her father's home. His heart leaped at sight of her; but she looked wan, miserable. She did not even glance at the hut.

Charles Prentiss limped into the Lane house; he was worn out, beaten, frightened off. The women and children gathered at the south end of the encampment; the women were anxious, for some of their men might not come riding back. The children were excited; they began to run around, playing at a battle, using sticks for guns. . . .

There was a man on guard outside Barney's hut. June disappeared from Olliphant's sight; he wondered where she had gone. He felt badly; she evidently believed he had killed Will Richards.

He heard her low voice, right outside the door, speaking to his guard, and his heart leaped. The man said, "Yes, Miss June—I'll go git it."

And a few moments later he heard the scrape of a key in the padlock. June pushed in the door. Right outside stood Barney's pet paint horse, saddled. "Hurry—get going," the girl said. She had cleared that side of the hut, so he could ride.

She had a six-shooter in one hand; she'd kept it hidden under her blue apron and had fooled the guard into leaving the door.

Barney stepped to her; she was tense, drew back to let him pass. He

turned, and her eyes met his for an instant, then she looked down.

"June," he murmured, tried to take her hand.

"Stop that—quick, you haven't any time to waste. They mean to hang you when they come back. I heard them say so."

"But—yuh don't b'lieve I killed Richards, do yuh?"

"Yes, I do. You shouldn't have done it."

He caught her, kissed her lips. She tried to beat him off, fists tight. "You fool!" she cried, "I—I don't love you. You're nothing but a stupid young waddy—I'm engaged to marry a man in the East. Go on, ride, and don't come back. My friends will not forgive me for this but I feel it's partly my fault, your being in this mess."

"Yuh're—yuh're goin' to hitch up with some dude?" he stammered.

"Yes. Why not?" Her eyes were cold.

Dazed, he turned and stumbled out into the sunlight. The paint horse nuzzled his shoulder, and Barney somehow mounted. "Sorry, ma'am," he muttered. "I reckon I had things all twisted."

A camp guard spied him and snatched up a rifle. June Lane raised her revolver and cried shrilly, "George —if you shoot I'll fire at you!"

The startled rancher stared at the determined young woman. Barney Olliphant went galloping across the clearing and was out of sight before the sentries gathered their wits.

HE spurred south for a couple of miles, his heart dying in his breast. So she had made a fool of him, he thought. She loved someone else; yet she'd let him stay there with her—but, after all, what had she let him do? Only hang around her, like a simple fool. She was right, that's what he was, to think such a girl would go for him.

He meant to find Hank Ball, his red-haired friend, and have Ball clear him with Lane. Then he would leave the country. Maybe go with Ball, if Hank would have him; a couple more fights like the one they had had at Dugan's barn and he wouldn't have any more heart cutting him so—

"Aw, the hell with it. Let 'em think what they want."

He shrugged, and yanked the left rein of the paint horse. The animal swung eastward, veering off the trail. "I'll make me a big circle," muttered Olliphant aloud, "and haid for Kansas. Shore never look at another woman, not that way."

"Barney!"

He jumped in his leather, turned to look sideways down the Carville trail. There came Hank Ball, hell-for-leather. Strung out behind the red-head were a dozen hombres, the dead Borden's patched-up deputies and a few nail-biting citizens hastily gathered up in Hank's scoop that morning.

"What's up?" Olliphant asked, as Ball swept to him.

"Hey, have any men left the camp?" Hank demanded.

"Shore, most of 'em, to chase a Mex bandit named Salcedo who tried to rustle their cows—"

Hank was already on his way, turning along the branch to the west.

"C'mon if yuh want to fight some more," he sang back over his shoulder. "It's an ambush—at the Gully."

Barney shrugged. "Callate I might as well die one way as another," he grunted. Hank Ball's aides were whirling by him.

He cut into line and the paint horse went full-tilt after Ball. The dust whirled up, already disturbed by the passing of the Lane Valley men.

He kept Hank in sight; the light glinted on the red hair under the set hat. They were in sight of the Gully, that narrow constriction of the trail

where they had had the fight with Will Richards.

Suddenly gunfire, a terrible, smashing volley, broke the dry air. Ahead, Barney could see a bunch of the Lane ranchers, shoving into the pass; the others were up there, caught between the deadly fires of Blackjack Dugan's gunmen, lining the shelves of the Gully, while up ahead, stopping the front end of the gap, a bunch of Salcedo's raiders grouped behind rock shelter.

As Barney saw Hank Ball turn off and cut up the side of the trail, a contingent of Mexes appeared from the south bush to prevent any man from escaping at the east hole of the Gully. They had the Lane Valley ranchers in an airtight trap; they could kill them at their pleasure.

OLLIPHANT'S paint horse stuck in his hoofs, up the rock slide after Hank Ball. The deputies made it, and Hank Ball, dismounting, grabbed his rifle. The din of gunfire was deafening; the killers were concentrating on the victims they had below, were shooting rapidly into the confused mass of men. Horses reared and fell; in the crush the Lane Valley men were unable to make good use of guns, or even to move out.

Now Hank Ball was up above the north line of Blackjack Dugan's rascals. Men were dying below, cries of wounded rose to the blue sky, with the beating red dust.

Olliphant followed Hank Ball's lead. He began shooting down at the backs of the outlaws strung along the shelves over the Gully. At Ball's first fire, two of them flipped over into the seething hell below. Olliphant and several deputies were shooting now, and their stinging fire on the exposed rear of Dugan's rowdies ruined the game. It was one thing to shoot men who couldn't shoot back; another to take it that way.

Blackjack Dugan's voice came roaring up in slathering fury, as he realized that the biters were being bit.

"I'd like to git him," muttered Hank Ball, swinging his rifle toward the giant rustler.

Olliphant grunted "Good shot—" but Blackjack Dugan, after suddenly folding up, could be seen to jump for a rock, dragging a leg after him.

The Mexican raiders who plugged the two entrances to the Gully began exchanging fire with the deputies brought by Hank Ball.

"That's Vasco Salcedo, that short, wide one," Olliphant cried to Hank Ball.

Across the Gully, to their left as they fired, they saw the bandit chieftain whipping his men to battle.

"Clear them greasers away from there," shouted Hank Ball.

The deadly bullets from his Winchester swept the shelves. Dugan's men, caught from above, the tables turned, had no stomach for such a scrap; they were fading off into the chapparral to the west, where their horses waited.

The Lane Valley men below, futilely trying to fight back at the hidden enemy over them, were trying to retreat from the Gully; it was Salcedo's job to finish them as they emerged.

Hank Ball thundered back to turn his guns on the Mexes. A half dozen of them died; the rest broke back from the exit to the Gully as the Lane people began to squeeze out. With his handful of expert gunfighters, Hank Ball gave them the chance they needed against the horde of raiders.

Once in the clear, the Lane Valley ranchers rapidly took themselves in hand.

"There's the Judge," Barney cried. "He's okay."

Lane had lost his Stetson and blood showed on his shirt, but he was yelling to rally his followers. So was

Blackjack Dugan, likewise Vasco Salcedo.

"Here they come, back at us," a deputy shouted, pointing west.

FIFTY or sixty gunmen, rallied by Dugan and his lieutenants, concentrating now on the new enemy Hank Ball had brought up, had hustled up the slope above the handful of men from Carville. A fusillade from their guns whipped through, cut down two of Hank's assistants.

"Join forces!" Hank ordered.

He had saved the Lane people, given them their chance. Hank Ball and Olliphant, followed by the deputies, hurried down to join the contingent from the Valley.

Mounted and free, Judge Lane's men charged Salcedo's raiders; the Mexes broke under the terrific fire of six-guns and rifles, galloped in mad retreat through the chaparral. Dugan, up on the high red cliff, was left without targets, unless he brought his hombres down to fight a fair battle.

The ambushers paused, fired a couple of ineffective volleys after Hank Ball, who had joined the Judge's crowd, then swung and hustled back to get their horses.

In the blood-soaked Gully lay thirty of Judge Lane's ranchers and waddies. Twelve were already dead, another half dozen so badly wounded they could not survive; the others were crippled. But the majority had ridden alive out of the trap.

And deadly toll had been taken of Dugan's gunmen and the vicious raiders from below the Rio Grande.

For an hour the Lane Valley men, splitting into groups, pursued the erstwhile ambushers. Judge Lane, with some of the older men, headed for the rim of the gleaming desert, to rescue the herds. A crew of Salcedo's Mexicans were driving the thousands of cattle south; they quickly galloped off across the grey-brown wastes when they saw who was coming.

Hank Ball, trailed by Barney Olliphant, caught up with Judge Lane. While they were riding, Barney had told Hank what had happened at the encampment.

"Howdy, Jedge," Hank growled.

He held out the letter which he had saved, the note Blackjack Dugan had sent to Will Richards.

"Looka here, yuh got Barney all twisted. He's a real man, Jedge. I shot Richards, when he tried to murder Olliphant. Richards was a traitor to yuh, was tippin' off Dugan."

Lane stared at young Barney. "I'm mighty sorry," he said, "mighty sorry, Barney. Yuh'll hafta forgive us. We were worked up."

Olliphant was embarrassed. "That's all right, Jedge." He was glad enough about it, though it didn't mean so much to him.

The Judge looked worn out and terribly depressed. "Seems like we'll never git back our home." He shook his silvered head. His followers were silent; never before had their leader shown he was ready to quit.

"Mebbe we oughta sell out and start somewheres else," Lewis growled.

Lane nodded. "I'm ready to do it, boys. We've lost so many friends, and it just seems to go on and on. The Valley ain't good for anything. Prentiss is goin' back East and that's the end, I'm afraid."

STRICKEN, the ranchers stared silently at one another.

Olliphant could think only of one thing: June didn't love him. She was going to marry some Eastern dude, some fine-talking hombre in store clothes—

He heard Hank Ball ask Lane, "Jedge, yuh ever hear tell of an hombre named Morgan in these parts?"

Lane's face was drawn in severe lines. "Morgan's dead."

"Yeah? Who was he?"

"A rustler and murderer. He used to run our stock out of the Valley, across the desert. One day we caught him at it—and we punished him."

"Strung him up?"

"Certainly. He killed a dozen men in cold blood; he was the most vicious devil I ever knew."

"Yuh shore he died?"

"Of course. I put the noose round his neck myself and his body hung there till the buzzards picked it bare."

Olliphant sidled out of hearing.

It was easy enough for him to push his paint horse into the chaparral to the north, and he rode away, heading for Kansas.

CHAPTER XV

The Desert

CLAMMY fingers of death had reached out for Steven Reese.

He had lost consciousness when he went down in the roaring black depths of the hole into which the Lane River plunged after leaving the Valley.

Aware of nothing, he had opened his eyes to an inky darkness, with water lapping at his body, the main stream flowing past him as he lay in the shallows on a stone byway cut out by the water as it turned in its underground channel. He was stiff, shivering.

"How long have I been here?" he muttered aloud, and his voice echoed hollowly in the cavern. He put out a weak hand, felt the limestone stalactites depending from the sides and roof of the cave.

Somehow he had been thrust out of the main stream. He put his fingers to his aching head; there were raw gashes in his scalp but they had stopped bleeding.

It was some time before he could muster the power to get up and feel his way along the wall; the murky blackness of the cavern let in no light here at all.

He made progress upstream, thinking that must be the way out, but had gone only fifty yards when the shelf narrowed so that he was unable to proceed. He turned, and, thinking himself hopelessly trapped, started back to the point where he had been.

Something struck him in the face, something furry, soft.

"Bat," he muttered, and his senses grew keener. If bats came in here, they must fly in and out—

He tried the other end, past the spot where he had been lying. Rounding a sharp outcrop of limestone, he saw a very faint streak of light ahead.

It came from a split in the rock, large enough for him to squeeze through. He kept climbing, and at last saw a bit of blue. It had been night when he had been swept into the underground stream; now the sun was high.

He pulled himself out onto a patch of rough ground overgrown with cacti and prickly pear with purple-and-green fruit. The warmth of the sun struck his aching bones gratefully. He was content to lie there, his body absorbing the life-giving rays.

Then he rose to take stock of the terrain and the immediate future.

He stood in a sort of depression, and the horizons were cut off so that he could see nothing eastward; far to the west glimmered the hazy mountain tops.

He started to walk east, toward the rim of the basin, which looked as though at one time it might have been a lake.

Suddenly he stopped, dropped to his knees; the sound of a man whis-

tling had startled him; he didn't want to bump into Salcedo and Dugan again.

Keeping low, he crept to the rocks that fringed the dry basin. Across a flat he saw a man, bent over, digging down into the earth. A packhorse stood with lowered head not far from him, and there was another mount, saddle cinch loosened for its comfort, to the left.

REESE slowly approached the prospector; he noted the battered felt hat on the grey head; the man didn't look dangerous, despite the old Sharps rifle propped against a boulder.

Reese was almost upon him before the digger turned and caught sight of him.

"Why, howdy," the old fellow said.

He was a tiny, thin fellow, old as the hills, a desert rat by the look of him. Myriad wrinkles pleated his sunburnt, leathery hide; his eyes were alert, however, as he took Reese in.

"Now where could a man go swimmin' in these parts?" the desert rat drawled.

Reese smiled. "Have you anything to spare in the way of food and drink?" he asked. "I don't want any water; I've had enough."

The prospector came up out of his hole. Silently he set to work to prepare a meal for Reese. He had tobacco and a small flask of whisky.

"Do you know a Mexican named Vasco Salcedo?" Reese inquired, as he began to eat—he was ravenous.

The desert rat nodded. "Seen him in the distance early this mornin', ridin' south with his men. But he didn't see me. Them fellers got a hideout in a dry gulch five mile south; not many people know 'bout it, but I do."

Hunger somewhat satisfied and the clamminess leaving his muscles, Reese's grave eyes began to take keener notice of his surroundings. He stared at the dirt which the desert rat had tossed out of the hole.

"Any luck?" he inquired.

The prospector shrugged. "I pan a little now and then. Mostly mixed with silver, though. It really don't pay."

Reese squatted there, sifting the dry stuff between his long fingers. There was a puzzled look in his dark eyes.

"Anybody lay claim to this desert?"

"Nope. It ain't good for much, I callate."

"How far is it back to Lane Valley?"

The desert rat waved his arm. In the eastern distance Reese could see the rising hills that marked the western end of the Valley of Death.

"You've prospected a good deal around here?" asked Reese.

"Yeah. Man and boy, fifty years."

"Is the desert all like this part—that is, what you dig up?"

The desert rat nodded. He was growing leery of the dude's persistent questioning. Reese drew a damp wad of money from his pocket.

"I've got to have a horse. Will you sell me one of yours?"

"Two hundred for the saddlehoss," the prospector said promptly.

Reese paid it without question. Mounted, he waved a hand, and started toward the Valley, leaving the puzzled desert rat staring after him. A fool who would pay two hundred for a rig worth about seventy-five didn't come along every day; but he was worth waiting for, thought the old fellow.

REESE reconnoitered the entrance to Lane Valley carefully before he pushed up through it. It looked deserted now, and peaceful. The stone hut where he had had the terrible fight with Salcedo's raiders was half blown to pieces; but the dead ones were gone. He saw the picked

skeletons of two horses, one of which he had ridden.

In the east, a dull, blackish pall of smoke hung in the sky.

Reese went up through the Valley. He stopped at several ranch houses, looked them over. Coming to a small, tumble-down place that looked as though it had seen better days, he was interested in the rough sign nailed to a fence post in front. It bore the name of Will Richards.

"Our spy," he murmured. He made sure no one was about; and, hiding his horse in the rickety stable, entered the old house. It was a mess inside, belongings strewn about. He began to search the place.

The traitor had evidently lived alone. In the lean-to kitchen Reese found mouldy supplies of food; there were empty whisky bottles tossed around, and a strewn deck of cards. A cupboard stood open; and a dead rat lay, a desiccated thing, below on the floor. On its sharp-toothed mouth specks of white powder gleamed.

There was a loose board at the back of the cupboard; the rat had evidently squeezed its way through. More of the white stuff—it looked like salt—had been spilled on the wooden shelf among the cracked dishes.

Reese seized the board and it came out easily enough. In a secret recess reposed a number of large linen bags. Rough paper tags were tied with white string to the bunched-up necks. One said "St. with Str." Another, "E. Sts. with Ox. A." There were some labelled simply "Ox. A." and "Str."

He found some writing he was pretty sure was Richards', signatures and some labels on bread box and sugar tin. Comparing this writing with that on the tags, he concluded that Will Richards had marked these hidden bags to keep them straight, for most of them contained similar white powders and crystals.

The dead rat had gnawed open a bag marked "St. with Str."

Reese stretched himself out on a bunk, took a cat nap. More rest than that, he was unable to get, for the sound of nearing hoofbeats brought him alertly awake. He moved swiftly to the east window of Will Richards' house, the direction from which the rider was coming. Having taken the precaution of concealing the horse he had purchased from the old prospector in the stable, he did not anticipate being discovered; he could hide in the house.

Night was near; the sun bathed the desert, touched the hills with blood-red light.

The horseman was moving down the Valley trail, heading for the desert.

"Olliphant!" Reese said aloud.

As he noted the dejected droop of Barney's handsome head and big body, shots rapped on the air, ringing through the Valley.

REESE put a hand to his holstered .38. The shots were followed by distant warhoops, the sound of which made Reese lose his tense air; he relaxed, grave dark eyes watching as Barney stopped, not far from the Richards' home, and turned to wait for Hank Ball to catch up with him.

Reese's heart leaped with joy as he saw the tall redhead spur up, his horse lathered and heaving. Hank, despite the several bandages stuck around his person, seemed in good health, as was evidenced by the profanity he loosed at Olliphant. It was A-1, the hottest and juiciest south of Dodge City.

"I'm the busiest hombre in Texas," Ball finished up, "and I got to chase yuh fifteen miles! Where in the name of the last Jumpin' Jehosephat yuh haidin'?" He paused for breath.

"I'm on my way, Hank," Olliphant drawled.

"I savvy," Ball said bitingly. "Yuh're the kinda man who busts a

gal's heart and rides off, leavin' it in pieces. She's been sobbin' for hours. They don't need no river over there; she's furnishin' it with tears."

"She's goin' to marry some Eastern dude. Said so herself."

The air crackled once more with Hank's picturesque descriptions.

"A fool, too," he ended up. "Yuh b'lieve ev'rything a gal says! Why, yuh—"

Reese stuck his head out the front door. "Would you mind," he said caimly, "bringing your large and easily seen carcasses inside here? And hide your horses in the stable. I've had one meeting with Blackjack Dugan and his pals and I don't hanker after another so soon."

The sound of his voice made Ball and Olliphant jump clear of their leather, so absorbed had they been in their talk.

"Steve!" exclaimed Hank Ball. He leaped to the ground, to seize his friend's hand, pump it.

Reese had them put their mounts out of sight, and the three retired inside the cabin. Swiftly Hank Ball informed Reese of what had happened since their last leavetaking.

"So Dusty's badly hurt—and Will Richards is dead."

Reese was thinking, thinking deeply. At last he stood up, straightened his long legs, looked gravely at the two young fellows.

"We've got to smash Blackjack Dugan and Vasco Salcedo," he said slowly. "And Morgan, their boss."

"I heard Jedge Lane say Morgan's daid, lynched years ago by a posse," Olliphant objected.

"Yeah, he said that," agreed Ball.

Reese shrugged. "I don't believe in ghosts. First off, Hank, since Will Richards is dead, I want Blackjack Dugan."

"Yeah?" Hank said. "S'pose I send him a written invite to tea? No doubt he'll come a-runnin'. But serious-like, Steve, Dugan ain't goin' to show hisself fer a while, not after that ambush at the Gully. He was recognized there; and his men shot down Sheriff Borden at the barn in Carville. I figger he'll haid for the chaparral acrost the Rio with Salcedo."

REESE shook his head. "No, the stake's too big. He won't run away, until he's certain the game's up. And I think I know where Dugan is."

Ball's blue eyes widened but he did not speak; he waited, willing to obey orders.

"I need a man," Reese announced, "to ride to Carville and look up the land records there. What I want to find out is who owns the desert west of here."

"Who owns it?" repeated Olliphant, staring at Reese in surprise. "Why, nobody. Who'd want such a place? It's worthless. Nothin' but dry sand and a few prickly pears and cactus."

"I want to check up just the same," Reese told him. "I must know for sure who holds title, if anyone does, to that area."

"I'll go," Hank offered.

"I'd rather you went with me," Reese replied.

"Where?"

"To fetch Blackjack Dugan."

Hank Ball's eyes glinted. "Okay. Barney—looks like you're elected."

Olliphant hesitated; he had made up his mind to forget June Lane. To see her again would only re-open the wound she had made. But then he shrugged, drawled, "I'll do it, mister. Yuh wish to know if any crazy pusson lays claim to the desert. Is that all?"

"No. I'm going to write a letter to Judge Lane and I want you to deliver it to him. Give it to no one else, place it in his hand alone. Understand?"

Barney heaved a deep sigh. He had thought he might ride around the settlement where June Lane was; but

now he would be forced to see her, go to her home. But he had given his word.

He pulled his husky frame erect, spurs clinking.

"Gimme the letter."

"Just a minute, and I'll have it ready."

Reese found a pencil and paper in Richards' table drawer, wrote a hasty but rather long communication, folded it, and gave it to Olliphant.

"I really need a first-class horse, Barney," the range detective said, as Olliphant pocketed the missive. "I bought the one I have from a desert rat and it's not much account."

"Okay," sighed Barney. He hated to part with his pet but he was willing to do anything for Hank Ball and the redhead's friend. "Yuh kin have mine. I'll pick up a fresh one at the Lane camp."

They watched Olliphant ride off up the slanting trail.

"We'd better start for Dugan," Reese announced. "Let's ride, Hank."

The two men mounted and headed west, out of the Valley of Death. The desert was a purple glory in the fading light. It was dark when Reese, in the lead, rode up to the dying red embers of a small campfire near the depression in the desert floor where he had emerged from the cavern of the underground Lane River.

THERE was nobody near the smoking coals, but Reese began to ride in an increasing circle, Hank Ball trailing after him. Presently, as they neared a black clump of rock, Reese heard the suppressed whinny of a horse, and stopped.

The click of a rifle being cocked caused him to call out, "Don't shoot—it's a friend!"

He struck a match so the hidden man could see his face. The old prospector emerged from the rocks, rifle in his hands.

"Now, looka here," he growled. "A bargain's a bargain. I got the better of yuh but I taught yuh a lesson that'll do yuh good, son. I ain't givin' back yore money."

Reese smiled at the old fellow's vehemence. "I haven't come to welsh on the horse trade," he assured the desert rat. "I know horses and that I paid three times too much for the plug you sold me, but I was grateful for your help and glad to give it to you. I've come here to offer you more money, because I want you to tell me exactly where Blackjack Dugan is."

"Huh? I can't tell yuh that, mister. Dugan's got a place in Carville and he's often in the bush. All I said was him'n Salcedo got a campin' hideout five mile southwest of here."

"Tell me how to get there and I'll pay you. I'll buy your packhorse at your own figure, and give it back to you when I'm finished—that is, if he's still alive."

Five minutes later Reese and Ball turned their mounts southwest, the packhorse led behind.

It was near midnight when the two saw the dark mouth of the dry gulch in which Reese believed Salcedo and Blackjack Dugan were camped.

The detectives tied strips of shirt cloth around the muzzles of the three horses, left them hidden in the brush with dragging reins a hundred yards out from the entrance to the gulch. There was no doubt the bandits would have sentries posted around their hidden camp.

"I smell smoke," whispered Ball as the two started to inch their way through the narrow entrance.

The night wind was in their faces; it brought the familiar odor of tobacco burning. There was a man sitting on a flat rock around the first turn; the glow of his cigarette reddened as he inhaled, and they saw the Mexican's sharp, mustached face, the glitter of the black eyes.

Now they could hear low voices, from down the deep split in the earth. There was a faint illumination from a small fire built under a projecting rock shelf that shielded the light from outside the gully and broke the rising smoke. A number of men lounged around the fire, drinking, smoking, talking, or asleep.

The sentry's figure was framed against the glow, and the two detectives, inching in, were in complete shadow to the guard.

A LOW whispered "Now!" came from Reese.

Hank Ball leaped; fingers of steel cut off the man's stiffled gasp; there was a quick scuffling that ceased as Reese grasped the small Mexican's legs. A revolver barrel made a short but vicious arc, dully thudded on the hombre's head, relaxing him completely.

Hank Ball put on the peaked sombrero; if seen in the darkness, he hoped its silhouette might help deceive bandit eyes.

The two went on, leaving the trussed, gagged Mexican behind the rocks.

Pausing outside the light circle, they could see the main camp. Blackjack Dugan's cruel face was visible in the firelight. He was in the act of lifting a whiskey bottle to his lips. Close at hand was the squat Salcedo, teeth gleaming as he matched the giant rustler drink for drink.

Only a handful of their followers had managed to stay with the leaders; the majority lay in a drunken stupor, wrapped in blankets or capes on the earth. Their horses were held two hundred yards down the gulch, which opened onto the south desert.

Reese and Ball waited, back in the shadows; the gangs evidently felt quite safe in their hideout, trusted to the sentry to give warning of any approach.

An hour later, Salcedo fell back, asleep before his head hit the dirt. The others had quit; only Dugan remained, triumphant in the drinking bout. He grinned, the world reeling before his small, reddened eyes. With an oath he threw the empty bottle in his hand at the rock wall; it smashed with a startling report in the darkness. Then Dugan collapsed.

The camp slept. "Reckon they have a guard at the other end," whispered Hank.

"We'll make it quiet," Reese replied.

It took them but a few minutes, as the fire died to a few coals under white ashes, to reach Blackjack Dugan.

CHAPTER XVI

Pursuit

FIRST to reach Dugan, Reese edged around to the giant's other side, while Hank Ball took the nearer flank. Ball's efficient pistol barrel did its work; Blackjack Dugan quivered for an instant as the steel thudded in his thick, untidy hair.

Reese swiftly applied a gag; then the two lifted the great body; Hank shouldered Dugan, and Reese took some of the weight by holding the hombre's legs.

They escaped from the gulch, staggered as fast as they could to their horses. Hands tied and with a piece of rope passing under the packhorse's belly to the trussed ankles, the gag firmly secured, Blackjack Dugan, when he came to, would be unable to cause any trouble.

"I'd better get started," Reese said, as he and Ball finished trussing their human freight. "Don't let 'em come too close to you, Hank."

"Okay. I'm to drop Dugan's hat 'bout a mile north."

"Right. See you in the morning."

Hank sat down to wait. Reese, leading the none-too-fast packhorse bought from the desert rat, the animal now burdened with Blackjack Dugan's limp body, started back toward the Lane Valley.

It was growing grey in the east when he reached the cabin of the deceased Will Richards, near the western extremity of the Valley. He lugged his prisoner inside, and took care to conceal the horses.

Reese removed the gag and waited for the giant rustler to come back to consciousness.

As the sky lightened, he began to grow anxious; he went to the east window, stared out at the trail which led to the southern rim and the Lane settlement.

A rider topped the south ridge, broke into his view; a couple more were right behind him. Reese watched the three approaching the Richards cabin.

One was Judge Samuel Bowie Lane, the second was Rancher Lewis and the third, very shaky in his saddle, was a roly-poly hombre swathed in bandages so that about all that showed of his fat countenance were two round eyes.

"Dusty!" muttered Reese, starting for the door to greet his friend.

Blackjack Dugan was stirring, grunting in a stupefied way, as Dusty and Judge Lane came up.

"Dusty," cried Reese, "you shouldn't have come out. You're too weak—"

"I'm okay, Doc," Trail said wearily. He was swaying in his leather, and Doc Reese helped him down, supported him inside, and Dusty lay down gratefully on a bunk.

"I hadda come," he told Reese. "The sawbones wanted to keep me in town but I made the ride out to Lane's okay and when Olliphant brung yore message, I figgered yuh'd need me. Listen, the Chief of this hull shebang, Dugan and Vasco both, is one tough hombre named Morgan. He's a lot smarter 'n the rest of 'em, too. It was Morgan caught me outside the barn."

"I've hit his trail," said Reese grimly.

SUDDENLY as Blackjack Dugan shuffled in his bonds and grunted, Dusty Trail looked into the corner and realized what the limp heap of clothing there contained. With a curse, Trail got up on his unsteady feet, staggered to Dugan.

Dugan opened his bleary eyes, stared up into the angry face of the man he had come close to torturing to death. Fright came into the little red eyes of the gambler-rustler; he blinked.

"Yeah," growled Dusty, "yuh better blink, yuh consarned Injun devil."

There was a lump as large as a goose-egg on Dugan's head and he was plainly in pain. The amount of whiskey he had consumed the night before would have been enough to kill most men; besides, his head was splitting from the bang he had received when knocked out.

Dugan recognized Reese too, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head, as though he were seeing a ghost. Reese had plunged into the black abyss of the Lane River; Salcedo and Dugan had been certain he was dead.

"I want a hot iron, pronto," snarled Dusty Trail.

"Don't," quavered Dugan, voice breaking. He kept glancing at Reese, to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

In reply to Doc's queries, Judge Lane shook his head, sadly.

"I'm ready to quit, suh. The Valley's gone bad. Losin' all them friends at the Gully has finished me. It ain't for myself, but I figger it's better for my people to be pore and alive, than daid. I'm fed up with the hull dirty business."

"The Valley's as good as it ever was, Judge," Reese told him earnestly. "Human vandals have caused all your trouble, not nature. Dr. Prentiss and I will find what poisons were used."

Lane stared at the range detective. "Prentiss lost his nerve; he's gone back East. They nearly kilt him, and they burnt up all his stuff."

"Then we'll do it without Prentiss. Now listen—can you tell me who this Morgan is?"

Judge Lane shrugged. "We hung him—I told Ball that."

"Could you have made a mistake about it, hung someone else?"

"Impossible. I knew Morgan well and saw him die."

In the west, shots dimly rang out. Quickly Reese demanded:

"You followed the instructions I gave in the letter Olliphant handed you, didn't you, Judge Lane?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Good."

ON the level, hot desert, Hank Ball swung in his saddle to send bullets back at the horde of furious pursuers who had picked up the open trail Reese and he had left after catching Blackjack Dugan.

The sun gleamed on the flaming red hair of Ball, and his dark-blue eyes shone with diabolical mischief as he led the combined gangs of Dugan and Vasco Salcedo's raiders, under the squat Mexican chief's command, north toward the gap into the Lane Valley.

"Doc kin allus think of the sweetest tricks," he muttered.

He himself was in danger of sudden and violent annihilation, of course; if a crust of earth broke over a hole and his horse went through, Hank Ball would be through, too. They would tear him to pieces.

Salcedo rode the van, his wide body bent forward in the speed of his motion; he had found Blackjack Dugan's Stetson where it had been dropped to draw the raiders on. A hundred of them came loping hell-for-leather on Hank Ball's trail, Vasco's Mexicans and renegades, and Dugan's hired gunmen, eager to avenge the kidnaping of Blackjack.

Dust rose heavy in the coppery atmosphere of the seared desert. They were all taking long shots at Hank; he could, whenever he looked back, see spurts of dirt where the slugs struck, and a couple of times, when he let Salcedo get too near, he heard the dangerous whine of bullets in the air.

Ball's fast horse stumbled, nearly fell; a thrill passed through the red-haired hombre's breast. He lost a few seconds as he righted the big mustang and heard once more the close screech of Salcedo's lead.

"Whew, that was a close one," he muttered to the horse. He kept his eyes on the ground ahead, helping to guide the flying hoofs; another rolling stone like that one might be the end. Hank could feel the cold sweat on his brow; he was not afraid to die but he wasn't anxious to; not the way Salcedo would arrange it.

He swerved east, with the gorge of the Lane River looming before him. The pack of ravening devils was hot and avid on his trail, thirsting for his blood.

They picked up distance on him, too, as he was forced to slow down in the narrow, rising trail that led to the Valley, with the roaring of the white water on his left. Bullets rattled in the rocks, and one flipped viciously through the crown of his hat, the high-peaked Mex sombrero he had appropriated at Salcedo's camp the night before. The bandits had slept in drunken stupor till well after dawn, before rising, discovering Dugan's loss, and the trussed sentry.

"I hope ev'rything's okay," murmured Hank, eagerly straining high in his stirrups to see up the Valley.

The Valley looked deserted, silent. Nothing seemed to move in there.

Hank Ball fired his pistol into the air; gave a defiant cowboy war whoop that rang back in the ears of the killers chasing him. He had stung them, made them so furious they would not turn until he was in their hands.

HE shoved his tiring mount east along the river road. The van of the pursuit, Salcedo cursing his hombres on, broke into view behind him, and began yelping and firing after their prey. The rustlers and gunmen were all inside the Valley end, and Hank Ball, with a sharp cry, swung to face them, guns blaring death.

The rocks, the trees and bushes were suddenly alive with bristling guns, guns that drove a terrible hail of bullets along the breast of the oncoming horde. A dozen raiders left their saddles at the first volley; rifles spat again, the concerted reverberations booming through the narrow end of the Valley. Ten more of Salcedo's bunch went down.

Vasco Salcedo, a keen chieftain and leader, realized instantly that he had ridden into fatal ambush, that he was getting a terrible dose of his own medicine. He brought his wild black mustang to a sliding halt, bellowing orders to his men, even as he began to fire at the spurts of gunsmoke which were about all he could see of the concealed foe.

"Back—retreat, pronto!" he shrieked in Spanish.

The confused mass of riders, horses lathered and tired from the hot run after Hank Ball, untangled themselves. The rifles crackled mercilessly, picking off one after another before they could turn. The rear ranks became the van, as they swung to ride from the death trap.

Whooping ranchers, Lane Valley folk shooting in revenge for the Gully affair, for many a lost comrade and stolen cow, leaped from their cover and, seizing horses, mounted to pursue.

Salcedo was at the rear, now, as the horde had turned to run. As his bunched followers hit the exit of the Valley, to get back on the desert and ride for their lives, they were brought up short by the vicious smash of more hidden guns that cut them down from both flanks.

"Doc's plan is workin' swell," Hank Ball thought, as he drove in his spurs to follow up the horde of enemies, caught by enfilading rifle fire.

Dugan's gunmen and the dark-faced Mexican raiders of Vasco Salcedo were tough, blood-baptized hombres, ready for sudden death and expecting it. They fought the law and decent folk and most of them had rope nooses waiting for them in one town or another, for murder, for rustling. They were fighters; and now they were fighting for their lives.

With the fury of cornered rats, unable to get through the rocky, narrow gap at the western end of the Valley, they realized the only way out was to break through the flanks and scatter to the ridges that hemmed in the Valley.

Vasco Salcedo was one of the first to see this; he was in a favorable position to make such a play for freedom and life, and he chose it, deserting his followers. It was every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost.

THE bunched ranks ahead of him were dying from the heavy, steady fire of the entrenched ranchers at the west end, hidden behind rocks and tree trunks, only a gun muzzle or a Stetson showing now and then as they raised up to shoot. The pursuers from the east, out from cover, offered a target to the rear files of the gunmen horde, and six-shooters blazed back.

Hank Ball, up on the south edge of the charging mounted Lane Valley people, saw the broad, squat Salcedo as Vasco broke out of the ranks, emptied a revolver back at the Lane men, knocking two from their horses.

He swerved, observing that Salcedo had put a clump of mesquite and other trees between himself and the eager, charging ranchers.

"That's one sidewinder ain't goin' to escape outa here!" he growled.

Powder smoke rose in the draughts created by the narrowing of the Valley and the motion of the cool river water. The roar of guns was deafening.

Through the drifting dust and smoke, Hank Ball glimpsed Steve Reese at the west end, directing the fire of the ranchers stationed behind the rocks. Reese was standing up in full sight, making good use of a borrowed Winchester; every time it spoke, a bandit went down.

Most of the raiders were caught between the sweeping half circle of riders with Judge Lane, as the Valley fighters advanced their two flanks; Reese yelled an order, waved his hat, and the men with him burst out. A mad, hand-to-hand scramble ensued. Over half the raiders were down; the rest had left their horses, were shooting them to use as some sort of breastwork, for they were surrounded. A terrible mêlée of cursing, fighting men made the spot a hell.

Hank Ball would have enjoyed getting in there to be at the end of the scrap, but Salcedo, slipping cunningly from one spot of cover to the next, had managed to get free. The Mexican chieftain was shoving his strong black horse up the slope, nearly to the ridge.

Salcedo looked back over his shoulder; he saw the tall red-headed rider coming after him up the slope.

Hank caught the gleam of the Mexican's white teeth, gritted in fury, as Salcedo turned to fire back at him. A bullet tore a chunk of leather from Hank's right boot, another bit his shoulder, taking a piece of flesh along as it whirled to a stop in the trees behind him.

"Good shootin'," he muttered. The black mustang was striving up the hill and the jolting would have spoiled the aim of most men.

He slowed a bit to answer the fire. Salcedo, reloading, began to shoot at him again, and Hank gained on him.

Back of him, in the valley, the roaring of the mass battle dimmed in Ball's ears. He was intent on catching Salcedo. He threw up his pistol, fired as Salcedo turned to let go once more.

The black mustang reared up, nearly threw the expert vaquero from his seat; Salcedo fought the horse back into line, and Hank Ball picked up more of the intervening distance.

SUDDENLY he saw Salcedo free his spurred, booted feet from the stirrups, land with a cougar's springiness on the earth, running; and the black mustang collapsed. One of Hank's bullets had hit the beast, at the time it had reared; it had kept on till the last beat of its thoroughbred heart.

Hank Ball rapidly gained on Vasco Salcedo; the broad, squat hombre ran, with an absurd gait, but a short distance. His legs were bowed as a wedding ring, thought Hank. Vasco threw himself down behind a rock, swirled himself around to take care of his pursuer.

Ball felt the sting of lead that struck him in the ribs; another that bit his scalp, ripped off his hat. Salcedo was shooting in earnest now, from a steady footing.

A moment later Ball's horse fell, and the red-headed hombre landed on the dirt, scrambled close behind the bulk of his dead animal.

Salcedo's slugs plopped dully into

the still-warm, quivering carcass of the horse that shielded Hank Ball. Hank kept flattened to the ground; he was sure he had hit Salcedo a couple of times, but the Mexican kept up a steady fire, trying to get him with a lucky one.

Down behind the dead beast, Ball needed a chance. He could hold the Mexican till help came up from below; but he preferred to take Salcedo himself. On the other hand, if he put his head up, with Salcedo all set and grimly waiting, it would mean instant death.

He kicked off a boot, eased it slowly with his foot till it showed beyond his bulwark of flesh and bone. The boot jumped high into the air, as Salcedo put three bullets into it. As the Mexican concentrated on the unoccupied leather, Hank Ball seized the instant to bob up and roll his guns at the peaked sombrero and the oily brown face.

He shot, and he shot straight.

The Mexican's fire ceased. Silence fell over the duelists' bit of the world. In the Valley below, the shooting had died to scattered crackles.

Gingerly Hank Ball put up an arm, gun visible over the horse's ribs. Salcedo was cunning enough to play possum. But the gesture drew no bullets.

"Well, here goes, I can't stay here all day," Hank muttered.

Ready to shoot, he peeked cautiously over the horse. Salcedo had pitched forward on his face, lay there, the great barrel torso and head visible.

Rising up, Hank Ball, both guns ready to roll, limped painfully over to Vasco Salcedo. With his boot toe he kicked the gun from the brown fingers, and turned the raider chieftain over on his back.

There was a blue bullethole between the black eyes, glazed in death.

Ball wiped the sweat from his bronzed face, swung, and limped back down the slope.

REESE was out in the open, with most of the Lane ranchers and their men. They were wiping up the remnants of Dugan's gunmen and the Mexican raiders of Vasco Salcedo, a few of whom, badly wounded, held out to the death.

Hank Ball rolled himself a quirly, feeling he needed it. The dead lay all around, and the crying wounded. Mixed with the gunmen were decent ranchers who had fallen in the battle. Some of the killers had surrendered, lay panting, on the ground, watched over by the stern-faced cattlemen.

The might of Salcedo and Dugan had been smashed, smashed forever.

The shooting died away. The last raider was either dead or had thrown down his guns.

Hank Ball limped over to join Steve Reese.

"Callate we've busted 'em, Steve," he drawled.

Reese nodded. "I've got to get back to Dugan," he said. "There's plenty more to be done, Hank. Morgan's not caught yet."

CHAPTER XVII

Blackjack Dugan

BARNEY OLLIPHANT, heading back north after his run to Carville, saw ahead the encampment of Lane Valley folk. The women and the children were at home; the women staring northward, where their men were fighting against the combined might of Blackjack Dugan and Vasco Salcedo.

Barney, carrying out Reese's commands, had visited the land office, had had to wait for it to open.

Now he was returning to report to Doc Reese.

He swung off the trail, meaning to circle around the settlement, for he didn't want to see June Lane again. He had glimpsed her when he had delivered the note from Reese to the Judge and it had shaken him badly, jolted him from the resigned sadness of losing her.

He got halfway around the camp, when the sound of a horse in the chaparral caused him to look to the left—and there was June, breaking out on his trail.

"Hello, Barney," she said.

Her voice stirred him. "I wisht yuh wouldn't, June," he murmured. "I been tryin' to fergit yuh."

She started to draw herself up, pride urging her to retreat. Then she shook her head.

"I—had to tell you, Barney. I couldn't have you riding north and thinking I'd led you on, that I was engaged to someone else. But that was the only way I could think of to make you hurry out of our camp; I was afraid they'd lynch you. I did think you killed Will Richards, probably over me."

His heart jumped. "June! Then yuh ain't goin' to marry that dude?"

"There isn't anybody, dude or otherwise—"

Barney's face fell, but, seeing the way she colored, he cried, "Mebbe I got a chanst—like Hank Ball said. He claimed it was plain as daylight that yuh loved me only I thought he was wrong."

"Did he?" she broke in.

He thought she was piqued; he put out his hand, seized hers; she brought her horse closer and then he quietly circled her slim waist with a powerful arm, as though he didn't know what his arm was up to. She raised her lips.

"I love yuh, June."

"Your red-headed friend was right, Barney," she said softly.

That was why Barney Olliphant was late getting back to the Lane Valley.

Detective Reese stared at him for a moment; Barney's aspect had changed from that of a dull, broken man to a shining-eyed laughing youth whose heart was singing.

"The ride seems to have done you good," Reese remarked.

Hank Ball, slouched in a corner of Will Richards' house, chuckled. "Callate yuh took my advice, Barney."

Barney laughed, nodded.

"You found out for me who owns the desert, Olliphant?" demanded Reese.

"Yessir. It's all claimed, bought and paid from the gov'ment for a song a month ago. The big owner is a man named Zebulon Morgan of Austin. Along with him is a Fred Winters. Together they got half a million acres."

REESE heaved a deep sigh, nodded with satisfaction.

"That explains it. I thought so. Dusty—now we can get to work on Blackjack Dugan in earnest. Heat up your iron."

Reese spoke coldly..

"Hah," cried Dusty, getting up from his bunk. He glared at the huge Dugan and Dugan quivered, snarling like a trapped wolf.

Judge Lane was present and other leaders of the Lane Valley people.

Hank Ball watched the play. He wondered at Reese's icy ferocity, for Doc was not the kind that went in for torture. He said, voice low, in Reese's ear, "Will yuh kindly explain what the hell yuh're drivin' at, Doc?"

"Wait—you'll soon find out," returned Reese.

Silence fell, save for the crackle of the fire in which a rancher heated

branding-irons for Dusty Trail.

Dusty took the glowing iron, spat on it, the sizzle making Dugan wince again. The roly-poly hombre went to the huge gunman. Dusty was still weak but the task before him seemed to inspire him.

"Dugan," Reese said coldly, standing over Blackjack, "I want you to answer the questions I put to you. If you refuse or if you lie, Dusty will go to work on you."

Trail squatted beside the sallow, ugly face. "Remember at yore barn, Dugan," he growled, "how yuh done it? The iron went *'s-s-st'* ev'ry time yuh touched my cheek—like this—"

Lightly he seared Dugan's leathery flesh, the odor of burnt whiskers rising. Dugan screeched in anguish.

"Hold it, and we'll see how he behaves," growled Reese. "Now, Dugan, your Chief in this dirty game is Zebulon Morgan—right?"

"Go to hell!" snarled Blackjack.

The iron descended, sizzled in his beard. Quickly he gasped out: "Yeah —Morgan's the boss. It was all his idee, honest to—"

"Yeller," snarled Dusty Trail. "Why, I stood fifty times as much!"

Restraining his eager friend, Doc Reese went on, coolly drawing out Blackjack Dugan. The Lane Valley men listened, absorbed and then horrified as they realized the black depths of the plot which had so nearly ruined their existence, had cost the lives of so many of their friends.

"Who is Fred Winters?" asked Reese.

"Aw—nobody, just a rat from the East, a friend of Morgan's. Morgan knowed him in the pen; they done time together."

Blackjack paused, sullen.

Dusty Trail menaced him with another, freshly-hot branding iron fetched for him by Hank Ball, who saw Reese's game now.

"Morgan wanted a man to pretend he was an Eastern buyer," added Dugan hurriedly.

"So that was it," growled Judge Lane. "That Winters feller was a scrawny little rat; had a nasty scar on his left cheek—"

"What was the first name of the rustler you hanged, Judge?" Reese inquired.

"Ben—Ben Morgan."

"And our man is Zebulon. Dugan, what's the connection?"

DUGAN replied, eye on the glowing iron, "Well, Zebulon was Ben's kid brother. He told me he'd swore to make the Lane Valley hombres pay for hangin' his brother."

"I didn't know 'bout Zebulon," Lane murmured. "Never seen him at all. He shore went a long way for revenge. Why didn't he just drygulch me and whoever he hated?"

"Because it wasn't simply revenge. There was a great fortune in it, Judge," explained Reese. "Morgan wanted the Valley, had to have it. That's why he laid claim to the desert."

"What good's the desert to him?" the puzzled Lane began.

"The desert is not a desert. That is, not in the sense the word usually implies," Steve Reese said. "I've seen some of the undersoil. The top is dry, blows in the wind; but it's not alkaline and sandy. An old prospector with whom I talked tells me it's uniform throughout, and all the dirt needs is water to bind it."

"There ain't any water, though," Rancher Lewis objected.

"That's the reason Morgan wanted your Valley. A dam at the western end, easily constructed in the narrow pass, would fill the valley, form a vast reservoir which could be used to irrigate the great stretches of the desert. Farmers are coming to the West now; there would be millions of dollars profit in such a project. Towns would

spring up; new ranches; the so-called desert, watered by the reservoir, would provide a virgin country covering several counties."

The amazed ranchers stared at each other, then, fascinated, back at the urbane Reese, who was now uncovering the mysteries they had failed to understand.

Blackjack Dugan stared, too, at Reese. "Who the hell squealed?" he demanded. "Who told yuh all that, Reese?"

"No one, Dugan. It's the simple explanation of Morgan's motive in trying to get the Lane Valley, the only logical one. He didn't want to kill Judge Lane at first; the best way was to frighten you all out, and get title cheaply to your land; then he could have you murdered if he desired, or let you suffer in poverty."

"But—where's the poisonin' of the Valley come in?" Lewis inquired. "I s'pose the meanin' of that was to skeer us out?"

Reese nodded. "That was its purpose." He stepped to the kitchen, came back with several of the bags he had found in Richards' secret cupboard.

"Your supposed friend and comrade, Will Richards, spread the poison about at Morgan's instruction," he continued. "It was easy for him. I understand that Richards was a lazy, good-for-nothing gambler, who'd lost all he had. Suddenly he seemed to turn over a new leaf, and went from ranch to ranch, giving his neighbors a hand with their work. This gave him the opportunity to plant the poisons. This bag—marked for Richards' benefit so that he could keep them straight—'St. with Str.' is salt with strychnine. Sprinkled on the grass, it would attract cattle and horses; licking up the salt, they would die from the strychnine, while the salt would cause the grass to wither, leaving the brown spots.

"HERE'S another: 'E. Sts. with Ox. A.'—Epsom salts with oxalic acid. Richards would slip this terrible oxalic acid poison into a box of Epsom salts—most families keep one. Or sprinkle a bit of strychnine or oxalic acid in a salt shaker or in the sugar bowl. The first persons to use it would die, shaking off the top layer.

"It was easy. By the time one or two in a family died, in agony from the poisoning, Richards was on his way to another house. Richards was hand-in-glove with Morgan and Dugan, supplied them with inside information as to the Lane Valley people's plans."

The cold, impressive voice of the range detective paused. He looked down at Blackjack Dugan, whose thick lips hung open. Dugan was terrified at the exact knowledge Reese had gleaned of the plot; he knew that he was doomed to pay for the wholesale deaths.

Dugan licked his dry lips; his eyes were held by the strong gaze of Doc Reese.

"Dugan," said Reese, his voice rising with suppressed passion, "a chemist, a scientist, would soon have discovered what had caused the deaths of the people in the Valley. Richards knew that Judge Lane had sent for Charles Prentiss, from the East, to investigate the trouble—"

He broke off suddenly.

"I have it," he said.

"What's struck yuh, Doc?" cried Hank Ball.

"Judge," said Reese slowly, "you say Charles Prentiss, the scientist you sent for, was wounded?"

"Yeah," replied the puzzled Lane. "Gunned by Salcedo's gang. Had a bullet groove in his cheek; it was a shore enough gash."

"He lied," Reese snapped. "Salcedo wouldn't have shot at Prentiss."

"Why not?"

"Prentiss was in league with Morgan!"

"But he couldn't be," cried the Judge. "Why, he came from Austin University."

"Did you know Prentiss personally?"

"No, none of us did— By golly"—Lane clapped a hand to his head—"Will Richards rode to meet Prentiss at the train! I remember he insisted on it."

Reese nodded. "You're right about Prentiss," he said. "Charles Prentiss would never join with criminals like Dugan and Morgan. I think I can guess where Prentiss got his wound. I grazed him with one of my bullets in the duel I had in the valley, just before Salcedo came along!"

He turned again on Blackjack Dugan.

"Dugan—where's the real Dr. Prentiss?"

Simultaneously Dusty Trail made a quick jab at Dugan with his branding-iron. Blackjack said hurriedly: "Morgan kilt that Prentiss dude. Richards put him where we wanted him, in the bush, and Morgan shot him dead and took his gear."

REESE drew in a deep breath. "That's it! That clears it up. The man we believed was Charles Prentiss was actually Morgan wearing Prentiss's clothing and glasses and somewhat disguised!"

"Yuh're a devil," whined Dugan. He was completely cowed, made no further attempt to hide anything but replied openly to Reese's swift queries.

"Why did Morgan bring you in on this dirty game—and Salcedo?"

"Morgan hadda have a local connection, somebody who could watch the land office and handle things. We figgered we might need men, dummies to stake out claims later, mebbe. Yuh see, Morgan escaped from prison, and run to Sonora, where he hooked up with Salcedo. He was runnin' cows with Salcedo, stealin' 'em from the dons and—and sellin' 'em over here."

"Through you," added Reese. "Borden thought so."

Blackjack shrugged. "Okay, through me. We had that desert gulch. Well, while he done time in prison, Morgan studied a lot 'bout soil and chemistry, in the jail school. He was down this way, hopin' to git even with Lane who had hung his brother.

"It was Morgan who realized how rich the desert soil really was; he talked with a couple prospectors and done some diggin' hisself. Fust, Morgan and me was runnin' it; then when Lane refused to be skeered out by Richard's pisenin', Morgan decided we'd hafta bring in gunmen and wipe the Lane people out, 'specially Lane, if they kept on refusin' to sell.

"When he found out 'bout this Prentiss comin'—through Richards—Morgan said we'd hafta stop it, 'cause a scientist could discover in a jiffy jist what pisens were used. So he shot Prentiss, and took his place, aimin' to discourage Lane.

"But you detectives horned in on the game. We got Salcedo up, meanin' to take keer of the Lane people and you too. There was plenty of money in it, onct we sold that desert."

"And now," Reese said, "where do you suppose your pal Morgan will head for, Dugan?"

Dugan shrugged.

"He was with Salcedo in Mexico, wasn't he?" Reese prodded. "That'd be the safest spot for him right now, and the easiest to reach. Where is Salcedo's Mexican headquarters, Dugan?"

"Salcedo's got a place in the mountains, in Sonora. It's 'bout fifteen mile southwest of the Rio, a right smart trip. Up this way, Salcedo usually camped in the gulch."

Reese nodded to Hank Ball. "We'd better get going. We can pick up Morgan's trail and follow it through. Then we can write finish to this job."

CHAPTER XVIII

To the Death

A WILD panorama, Sonora spread before Steve Reese and Hank Ball as their horses shook the Rio Grande water off their glistening hides and faced the lowering sun.

The trail ahead was difficult to follow. Morgan and the man who rode along with him had taken pains to hide it where they could, diverging to cross rocks or shale that left no imprints.

Both Ball and Reese were expert trackers; they unravelled the puzzle as they went along.

"They can't be far ahead," Reese remarked.

Sonora presented a real desert's aspects; the cactus growths were huge and weird, great barrels of green covered with spikes inside which, the Western-born Hank knew, reposed delicious water which the plant used. Then there were the branching candelabra of the organ cactus; the ocotillo, its fairy wand waving in the ovenlike breeze that came from the southwest. Prickly pear and creosote, the bayonet with its dangerous spikes, abounded here in the purple wastes of Sonora.

Hank pointed ahead to the rising, rocky mountains.

"They kin see us from above there, Doc."

Reese shrugged his dust-covered shoulders. He had donned Western riding clothes, boots and spurs, leather chaps to protect his legs from the myriad thorns of the chaparral. A wide brown Stetson shaded his grave-eyed face. He wore two .45 six-guns in crossed holsters, and his saddle boot carried a shining new Winchester rifle, loaded and ready.

"If we have to go to the Gulf," Reese grunted, with the motion of his mount, "we must catch up with Morgan, Hank. Such a man cannot be allowed to escape. The brain which could evolve a plot like that is far too dangerous. I think it will save us time and trouble, to say nothing of the lives of innocent people, if we take him now."

"That Fred Winters hombre with him ain't nuthin' but a rat," remarked Hank, eyes narrowed as he peered ahead into the hot horizon. "He's been weakenin'; stopped to rest five times—here, look, he done it again."

"Well, Morgan's not the sort of man to let anyone ruin him—" began Reese.

He broke off. In the distance, ahead, they heard a gunshot.

"Let's go," growled Hank, digging in his spurs. "They ain't far ahead, Doc."

"Not too fast," ordered Reese.

Aware of the deadly cunning of the man they sought, Reese had no intention of running into an ambush.

They were climbing a rocky slope, the loose shale sliding under the digging hoofs of their dust-covered horses. Near the brow they came upon the bulk of a chestnut-colored gelding, a powerful horse that lay helpless, his leg broken, in the way.

"Stepped in that hole and busted it," Hank Ball said, wiping sweat from his brow.

THE animal turned suffering eyes upon the two men. He was still alive but he could never run again, that was plain to Hank's expert eye.

"Damn him—he wouldn't waste a

shot on his hoss," snarled Hank.

Reese watched silently as Hank Ball put the chestnut out of his misery with a skillful shot through the brain.

"Easy, now, when you top the rise," he ordered, voice low, and the two pushed on.

They paused, alert, just under the brink of the razor ridge.

A man's low groaning reached their ears, and Hank Ball started forward, to check at Reese's terse command.

"Wait here," ordered Doc.

"Aw, Doc—"

"Yes. If anything happens to me—you get Morgan, understand?"

Reluctantly Hank waited there, hand on a gun butt, ready.

Reese dismounted, crept from rock to rock, peered over the ridge top. A man lay down the steep slope, a small hombre in dude's riding pants and a sweated blue shirt, open at the neck. His hat had blown off; he had a ratty face, now twisted in agony.

Well down the mountainside, Reese saw Morgan, riding on! He raised his rifle, fired the magazine after the man he wanted; the bullets bit up shale close behind the rider, who swung and emptied a pistol up at his pursuer. Reese did not shoot men in the back. Morgan put high boulders between himself and Reese, and paused to reload and shoot back at Reese.

"Go—go back—" a hoarse whisper reached Reese.

The startled range detective looked at the small Fred Winters, insignificant tool of Morgan's. Winters was trying to raise a hand but the awful wound that had torn away part of his spine prevented any motion.

Reese slid toward him. Eyes on the dying man, he failed to note the freshly disturbed shale close underfoot. He had no doubt as to what had happened: Morgan, his own horse gone, had shot Winters and taken the rat's mount on which to make his escape.

Acrid smoke was in the air; it was burnt powder smoke — Reese heard Winters whisper, "Dynamite—"

A wisp of smoke caught his eye; Winters was as good as dead; only suffering remained to him in this life. Reese threw himself backward, rolling head over heels across the ridge top.

A terrific explosion shattered the ridge. Reese felt a powerful, unseen force pick him up and hurl him through the air almost at the hoofs of Hank Ball's horse. Hank, stunned by the closeness of the dynamite charge, slid from his saddle; the horse, losing his hold on the ground, rolled down the slope, came up on his four legs, and began to buck, insanely.

A RAIN of broken rock fragments, some small, others big enough to kill, came from the black-smoked sky above them. Only chance saved them; a jagged chunk of flint landed within a foot of Reese's prostrate body. They felt the stinging impact of smaller pieces.

Ears ringing, Doc Reese sat up, wiping dirt and blood from his scratched face. Hank was cursing in a monotonous tone, trying to pull himself together.

"Sh—quiet," whispered Reese.

The reverberations of the explosion thundered off through the gulleys and the cliff walls of the mountains.

Reese began to creep back toward the ridge top, drawing one of his Colt .45s. He peeked up over the rocks. There was a deep crater where Fred Winters had been lying, but there was no sign of the little convict rat who had acted as Morgan's dupe.

Hank Ball came up to join his friend.

"Keep down, out of sight now, and make no noise," Doc warned.

For a long time there was silence; the man hidden in the boulders below did not make any movement.

Then, from one of the great rocks, the sun glinted on metal.

"Here he comes," murmured Reese, revolver cocked.

Morgan appeared below. He knew he could not shake them off; he hoped he had disposed of them with his dynamite trap. They could glimpse his lithe, tiger-like body as the man eased his way from rock to rock up the slope, rifle in hand, approaching with the stealth and deadliness of a stalking jungle beast.

There was none of the amiable scientist he had impersonated about Morgan now; he had cast off all pretense. Cleverly as he had played his role, Reese had exposed him, forced him to run from all that he coveted, that he would have won had it not been for the range riders.

"He's the wariest devil I ever came up with," Reese breathed.

Hank Ball nodded, waiting. The strain of the case had taken its toll, even on the iron constitution of the red-haired, powerful youth. Wounds had sapped his strength.

"He's stopped," whispered Reese.

Morgan flattened himself behind a great rock. Something had warned him, innate instinct of the hunted, or there was a wrong sign that he did not like on the ridge.

"It's that horse," Reese said.

The mustang was still kicking up; the thudding of his hoofs evidently was audible to the killer below.

A rifle bullet zipped across the top of the ridge, right above the two crouched there. Bits of shale spattered them.

"We'll never git him outa there," muttered Hank. "It's gittin' near to sundown, Doc. He kin creep off in the dark on us."

Reese nodded. "Now's your chance to practice some of your double shooting," he whispered. "Hold him, Hank."

Hank Ball grasped both of his six-shooters, calloused thumbs ready to roll the hammers.

MORGAN'S long slugs slapped the ridge crest, whined past them through the air; he was hoping to stir them up.

"Open up, Hank—but be careful not to expose yourself, he's a wonderful shot," said Reese.

He was crawling back down the slope, leaving Ball to hold the fort. Hank Ball began shooting, rapid-fire from both hands. His bullets rattled into the big boulder, and Morgan waited, keeping behind his shelter, until the red-head had emptied his guns.

Rapidly Hank reloaded, began firing once more; in the pause Morgan stuck out his rifle, and every shot he placed struck within inches of the spot where Ball's smoke puffs showed.

Reese was hurrying south along the side of the ridge, picking his way among the spewed boulders. Hank glanced over once, saw that Reese had gone down some distance, and was now crouched, approaching the crest. He made his guns bark double, to fool Morgan into thinking they were both up there, shooting. . . .

Reese peered over the top, down at an angle. The bulge toward which he had worked himself hid him from Morgan's vision for several yards as he wormed down the western face of the killer's ridge.

Pausing, he could see Morgan's rifle as it was thrust forth for a shot. But, if he were to get to Morgan, he must rise up and run across an open space for several hundred yards—that, he knew, would be certain death, with such a marksman as Morgan.

But his keen eyes saw the curving face of the gigantic boulder behind the rock Morgan was using as cover.

"Maybe it'll work," he thought aloud.

He could estimate the position of

Morgan's body by the rifle, the spurts of smoke. Carefully he raised his pistol and began to shoot, not to the right where Morgan lay, but to the left of the murderer's stone, so that his bullets struck the curving face of the larger boulder. Aimed at such an angle, the slugs should glance enough to strike Morgan as he lay prostrate to the right of the spot where Reese's bullets hit. The ricochets would force Morgan to move.

Absorbed in planting his lead in correct position, Reese caught the glint of the reddened, dying sun as it shone from Morgan's rifle barrel when the man swung it hastily toward Reese. The bullet spanged within inches of Reese.

"There he goes!" That was Hank Ball, whooping it up; he fired swiftly after the man who appeared from behind the rock.

Reese's ricocheting slugs had driven him out; his position was untenable.

Both Hank and Reese fired at the killer as he limped, in a half crouch, for the next spot of cover below. They had flushed him out; the sky was purpling, now, the night would drop suddenly.

WITH a mad warwhoop, Hank Ball leaped into sight at the top of the crest; both Colts banged with deadly fury as he rolled them. Reese was shooting as fast as he could, and he was an expert marksman.

Morgan let go of his rifle; the stunning explosions of the revolvers rang from the cliffs. The half-crouched figure below suddenly collapsed, rolling over and over on the shale, bringing up short against the edge of a boulder.

Lying there, the body twitched several times—Ball stopped his rolling thumbs, and started down. Reese joined him and they approached Morgan.

Morgan was dead, riddled with bullets.

Hank Ball wiped blood from a fresh wound that weltered in his hair. He sat down on the flat rock nearby, staring at the terrible foe they had at last come up with.

The face, upturned, was set in cruel lines of hatred, teeth gritted together; the eyes were glazing but still shone with the ferocity of the real Morgan. Bits of white, which Morgan had plastered to his brown-haired temples, to give him a middle-aged appearance when he posed as Dr. Prentiss, still stuck to the strands, but obviously he had been in the full prime of his power, a devilish, cunning killer. The healing scar where Reese's bullet in the Valley duel had hit him, was plain.

Dark was upon them. "Roll some rocks on him, and let's be riding," ordered Reese.

The cairn they left behind marked the grave of one of the most deadly criminals the range riders had ever encountered.

Wearily, feeling the strain now that the job was done, the two comrades found their horses.

CHAPTER XIX

The Call

VIOLINS squeaked merrily, and the Lane Valley people laughed and danced. They were celebrating their return to their beloved homes, a return made possible by the clever work and fighting ability of the three men who were the guests of honor at the shindig Judge Lane was holding as a thanksgiving at his big ranch house.

Behind these people were their days of terror and misery; there were mem-

ories of the dead, but those they could overcome and ride on triumphant.

They loved their Valley, no longer the Valley of Death but of the Living, of hope. They would never give up their homes; if the desert were irrigated, it must come from some other source than the flooding of the Valley.

Barney Olliphant was there, dancing with June Lane. The Judge, smiling, raised his hand for silence.

"I got an announcement, folks. It makes me very happy and I know yuh'll all be happy, too. June's goin' to marry Barney Olliphant—"

A cheer went up, and Barney flushed, grinned as he took June in his strong young arms and kissed her.

"Looka that," sighed Dusty Trail, in Hank's ear. "I wisht I was tall and handsome like him. Mebbe some gal would do that to me."

"Why, yuh old heart-buster," Hank exclaimed. "How 'bout that fat Mexican gal who chased yuh acrost the Rio last year with a butcher's cleaver?"

"Mebbe Mister Reese'll say a few words to us," the Judge announced.

Steven Reese rose, bowed to the company. "I'm not much of a hand at speech-making, folks," he said gravely, "but I am very glad to see you so happy tonight. We—"

A FLURRY at the door made him pause; he looked over the heads of the crowd, and saw a dust-covered rider who had entered.

The newcomer shouldered through the people, toward Reese, raising his hand. It was one of the deputies who had fought along with Hank Ball. He had just ridden in from Carville.

The punch bowl was full and ready, and Hank Ball nudged Dusty. "C'mon, let's git after it," he suggested.

They were just getting started among the eatables, when Reese's voice behind them caused them to turn.

"Come along, boys," ordered Doc. "We've got to be riding."

"What, leave all this food uneat?" cried Hank.

Dusty swore under his breath. He saw the yellow telegram sheet in Doc's hand.

"Where we haidin' now?" he groaned.

"North, boys. Bad situation up there. Men murdered, shot down in cold blood on the range. It's open war. There's no time to lose."

Five minutes later, mouths and pockets crammed with what they could grab, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail fell into line with Doc Reese.

They left behind them happy people straightened out. The velvet night, aromatic with the chaparral, closed over them as they turned their horses to the north to array themselves against fresh forces of evil threatening the Western range.

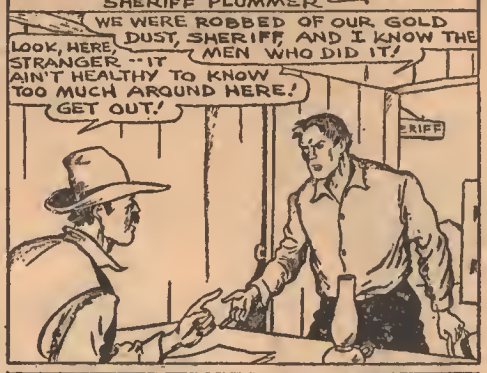
Next Issue: WINCHESTER WAR, a Book-Length Novel

RIDERS OF THE WESTERN TRAILS

TRUE SAGAS OF THE OLD WEST

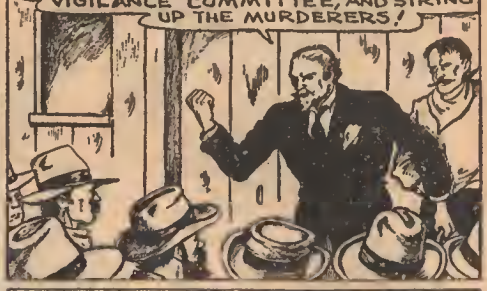
PLUMMER'S ARM WAS SHATTERED, BUT CRAWFORD FLED TOWN AND PLUMMER BECAME SHERIFF. NOW IN SUPREME COMMAND OF THE LEGAL FORCE, PLUMMER REORGANIZED HIS BAND OF 27 DESPERADOES INTO "ROADSTERS", THOSE WHO COMMITTED THE CRIMES, AND "RUNNERS" WHO ACTED AS MESSENGERS. PLUMMER, HIMSELF, WAS AS SHERIFF, ABLE TO SPOT LIKELY VICTIMS

LAW ENFORCEMENT BECAME A JOKE UNDER SHERIFF PLUMMER —



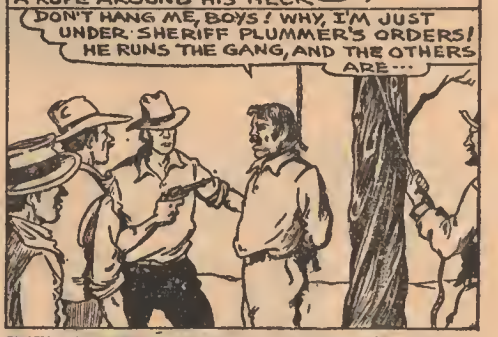
THE PLUMMER GANG'S MOST BRUTAL CRIME WAS THE MASSACRE OF THE MAGRUDER PARTY. MAGRUDER AND FOUR COMPANIONS STARTED EAST WITH $50,000. THEY WERE JOINED BY MEMBERS OF THE PLUMMER GANG, WHO, AT NIGHT, SLEW THEIR VICTIMS WITH AXES —

FINALLY, THE MURDER AND ROBBERY OF A YOUNG MAN NAMED TIEBALT, WAS THE LAST STRAW —



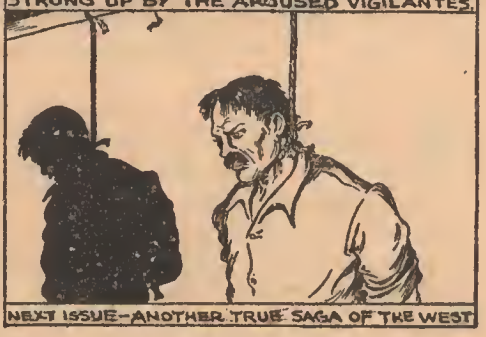
FINDING THE MURDERED TIEBALT'S MULE IN THE BARN OF GEORGE IVES, ONE OF PLUMMER'S BANDITS, THE VIGILANTES SET OUT AFTER HIM. IVES LED THEM IN A WILD CHASE OVER THE BARRENS —

IVES WAS CAPTURED AND HUNG. THEN "RED" YAEGER, A PLUMMER "ROADSTER", WAS APPREHENDED. THE VIGILANTES PUT A ROPE AROUND HIS NECK —



YAEGER CONFESSED EVERYTHING. THE VIGILANTES STRUNG HIM UP, AND THEN SET OUT AFTER PLUMMER AND HIS SATELLITES. PLUMMER WAS CAPTURED IN HIS CABIN —

PLUMMER BEGGED FOR HIS LIFE ON HIS KNEES. HE WAS HANGED, WITH FOUR OF HIS COMPANIONS, FROM A BEAM. IN ALL, TWENTY-FOUR PLUMMER BANDITS WERE STRUNG UP BY THE AROUSED VIGILANTES.



NEXT ISSUE—ANOTHER TRUE SAGA OF THE WEST

Hell Roars on Bear Lodge Peak as Johnny Craig, Two-fisted Cowprod, Risks Death to Prove Himself a Man!

Pointblank the Ambusher fired at the waddy

A PARIAH SELLS BOOT HILL

By H. CHARLES McDERMOTT

Author of "Mustanger's Last Job," "Law Guns Roar," etc.

AILENE FORREST had no business in the 2-Cross corral, even if she was the boss's daughter. Johnny Craig told her so.

"Listen, Ailene," he said, scrubbing his sweat- and dust-streaked face with a bedraggled bandanna. "Why don't yuh take a seat on the top rail? You can watch the fun just as well from there—an' a plumb site safer. We popped these critters outa the oreana thickets, 'n they're wilder'n mountain cats on a fresh blood scent."

Johnny Craig was young, perhaps twenty—lean, brown, with level blue eyes and a ready grin. But the young waddy wasn't grinning at the present moment. There was a double motive

behind his argument with Ailene Forrest. For not only did he honestly fear for her safety, but he had a strong hunch her desire to hang around the corral was linked to the presence of Monk Larkin, the new hand her father had hired on for roundup.

Monk Larkin was entirely too handsome for Craig's peace of mind. Added to that, the dapper rider was a tophand with horse and rope, and worked in the flashiest outfit Craig had ever cast his eyes on. Craig himself was clad in hickory shirt and dusty jeans. And a two-hour spell at the branding fire hadn't improved his appearance any.

To his plea Ailene now turned a deaf ear. "Don't be absurd," she said. "To hear you talk, anyone would think I've never been in a branding corral before. You attend to your own business, Johnny Craig—I'll take care of myself!"

She turned, and Johnny Craig winced at the dazzling smile the girl threw Monk Larkin across the corral.

"Darn wimmen, anyhow!" he muttered. "They're always fallin' for fine, flossy feathers!"

SUN beat down like the breath of a blazing furnace. White dust rose in clouds, churned up by the hoofs of a hundred wild-eyed steers bunched along the far side of the big corral. Two riders worked through the cattle, Monk Larkin and "Shorty" Peters. Between them they hazed a bawling, orey-eyed steer into the open, crowded it toward the fire. With a few deft movements it was stretched for branding and earmarking.

Wrapping a piece of burlap about the handle of his hottest stamp iron, Craig set the brand, coughing as acrid gray smoke curled up from scorched hair. Tossing the iron aside, he straddled the brute's shoulders, jammed a knee under its jaw and undercut the right ear, then swallow-forked the left.

Scrambling to his feet, Craig retrieved his iron. Larkin and Shorty flipped loose their ropes and the steer lurched to its feet, bawling hell and brimstone through flared nostrils as its maddened gaze swept the enclosure.

Craig had turned back to his fire. The first intimation he had of anything wrong was Shorty's warning bellow. Flashing a glance over his shoulder, the waddy saw an insane red-and-white thunderbolt charging down upon him.

His reaction was instinctive. Hurdling the fire, in three long jumps he reached the fence and scrambled to safety. But it had been close—so close that the snorting steer catapulted into the heavy poles before it could check its speed. The structure sagged and creaked, but threw the animal back.

Then, suddenly, Johnny Craig's face went ashen. Through the rails he could see Ailene's frail, slender figure there in the middle of the corral. She stood unmoving, staring as though fascinated at the locoed steer.

Craig shouted, and was back into the corral in a flash. But the enraged brute was ahead of him. With a deep-throated bellow it lowered long, razor-pointed horns and charged straight for the girl.

Johnny Craig groaned. He could never reach her in time. Suddenly Shorty Peters snapped into action as Ailene screamed. The runty puncher spurred his bronc between the girl and the charging steer; but with cunning perversity, the animal eluded him and tore on.

Ailene stood frozen, unable to move. A queer lump choked up in Craig's throat. Then, magically it seemed, a long, snaky rope writhed through the air. A loop curled about the plunging forefeet of the maddened brute, tightened with an audible twang. The steer was slammed to earth almost at the girl's feet.

Johnny Craig's breath gusted out in a whistling sigh of relief. When he reached Ailene's side she was perched safely on the top rail of the corral.

"Hurt?" he queried anxiously.

"Hardly," she retorted. "But it's not to your credit I wasn't. I saw you running for the fence. It's nice to know there's someone like Monk Larkin around—someone whose first thought isn't of his own safety!"

Craig was crushed. True, he had vaulted the fence to safety. But he had rushed back again, on foot at that, when he had recognized the girl's danger. His bitter thoughts were interrupted by Monk Larkin riding up.

"That was a nice throw, Monk!" Ailene exclaimed enthusiastically. "You certainly saved my fragile beauty."

Craig himself was conscious of a sudden glow of gratitude for Larkin. He thrust out a grimy hand.

"Shake, Larkin," he said quietly. "That was a champion toss."

But Monk Larkin didn't seem to notice the hand. His eyes were on Ailene's flushed face, drinking in her admiring gaze.

"It was easy," he shrugged with poorly feigned indifference. "The steer didn't have a chance."

Craig's gratitude vanished before the other's inflated ego. He gritted his teeth, turned back to his fire and irons.

JUST before noon the job was finished. The corral gates were opened and the steers turned loose to the freedom of the open range. With a sigh of satisfaction over a hard chore well done, Johnny Craig gathered up his irons, took them to the blacksmith shed, then crossed to the bunkhouse to scrub up for dinner.

Shorty Peters and Larkin were there before him. Their voices, lifted in quick anger, carried clearly to him as he hesitated just outside the door.

"Remember, Larkin," came Shorty's heated tones, "the kid was afoot. He didn't make no holy show of hisself, I'll grant yuh, but he wasn't sittin' high an' dry on a hoss, like me an' you. What the hell was he to do but hunt a fence when that steer went on the prod? I noticed yuh kept yore own bronc plenty much outa the way while yuh made that long cast."

"Results count, Peters," Larkin sneered thinly. "I reckon Ailene appreciates what I did."

"Hell!" rapped Shorty. "We all do, for that matter. But 'cause yuh was lucky, don't go throwin' rocks at folks who—"

"I'll say what I please—any time, anywhere!" Larkin cut in. "An' if yuh want my say-so, I figger this Craig hombre is just plumb yeller!"

Before Shorty could give vent to the angry words forming on his lips, Johnny Craig was through the door, eyes blazing, lean frame taut.

"Yuh can start figgerin' another way, here an' now, Larkin!" he flared, hooking a hard left to the surprised rider's arrogant jaw.

Craig's fighting skill had been picked up in range fights, in rodeo brawls and free-for-alls. He knew nothing of the finer art of boxing. Larkin, however, was patently versed in scientific fighting. As Craig clawed into action, Larkin deftly sidestepped. The next instant, the young waddy sprawled half his length under a bunk. The side of his head felt as if a steer had kicked it in.

Craig came up dazed and wobbly, but valiantly rushed back into the fray. This time he ran into a straight, hard left, which set him back on his high boot heels and brought a spurt of crimson from his nose. Instinctively, Craig hunched his shoulders and pulled his head down, barely avoiding a whistling right. As he ducked, he gathered his sinewy muscles, launched a rapierlike right into Larkin's unprotected body.

Larkin grunted and began to retreat. Craig came boring in, throwing punches as fast as he could piston his arms. A rock-ribbed fist spatted into Larkin's left eye; another battered his mouth. Larkin tried to parry but his blows seemed suddenly to have lost

their sting. He worked frantically to cover up.

"Go it, Johnny!" bawled Shorty, dancing about the bunkhouse excitedly. "Yuh got him goin' now, Nail him, Johnny!"

AND Johnny Craig "nailed" him, uncorking a sizzling right haymaker from the vicinity of his boot tops. It exploded squarely off Larkin's pointed jaw. The man's knees sagged, and he sprawled backward through the open door. Craig leaped forward, in time to see him land squarely in the arms of old Jeff Forrest.

"What in forty blazes of hell is goin' on here?" bellowed the 2-Cross owner.

Craig clamped his battered lips, turned away. Shorty shrugged, wiped a sly grin off his freckled face.

"Larkin branded the kid yeller," he huffed. "Johnny was just sorta changin' his mind for him."

Jeff Forrest snorted, but his gaze shrewdly appraised Larkin, who was still wobbly and glassy-eyed. A shaded twinkle showed in the gruff old cowman's eyes.

"He looks plumb convinced to me," he growled. "But I'm not likin' it any." Ailene told me Larkin saved her from a bad maulin' down at the corral. I'm beholden to him for that."

Shorty scowled. Old Jeff Forrest's glance locked with Johnny Craig's.

"Bury your spleen, Johnny," admonished the rancher. "If yuh go to pickin' a ruckus agin, yuh'll git yore pay pronto. Reckon I'd better take Monk up to the house so Ailene kin doctor him."

Supporting the stumbling Larkin with one arm, Jeff Forrest steered the beaten puncher's footsteps toward the ranchhouse. Johnny Craig, watching them go, watched Ailene meet them on the veranda. And a moment later he saw, with iron in his soul, that Ailene was bathing Larkin's welts with her own slim brown hands.

Muttering a curse, Johnny Craig turned into the bunkhouse, picked up soap and towel, then retreated to the pump tank. Here he cleansed and bathed his own bruises in moody silence. Almost before he'd finished, Jeff Forrest appeared at the bunkhouse again.

"Johnny, go hook up the buckboard," he told the surprised young waddy. "Shorty, sort out some of the campin' equipment; round up them three pack mules in the lower pasture an' corral a coupla gentle broncs. I been promisin' Judge Carson an' his missus a trip up to the Bear Lodge country to visit their boy's grave. Now that work's slacked off, this is my chance.

"I'll bring the Carsons out tonight —git started first thing tomorrer. Shorty, yuh'll go along to cook. I'm takin' Monk Larkin as bronc wrangler an' packer. Johnny, yuh'll have to hunker down an' keep an eye on the ranch. We'll make about a week's trip outa it."

Craig hooked up the buckboard in dour silence. Ailene and Monk Larkin would be together for a whole week. Craig would cheerfully have given his right leg to be going along, but he was too proud to ask Jeff Forrest to reconsider.

So he turned the buckboard over to the rancher without a word, then helped Shorty round up the mules and broncs, get the pack saddles and other equipment in order. And all the time he was conscious that Ailene and Monk Larkin were sitting in the cool shade of the veranda, laughing and talking.

Johnny Craig gritted his teeth, his bitter mood deepening. He could see that his connection with the 2-Cross outfit wasn't going to last much longer. But, he told himself, he'd stick until the old rancher got back. Then he'd cut his strings and drift.

That evening, when everything had

been put in readiness for an early start the next morning, Johnny Craig caught Jeff Forrest alone for a moment.

"Listen, boss," he said gruffly. "Yuh better be figgerin' on a new hand while yuh're away. I'm stickin' till yuh get back, then I'm rollin' my soogans."

Old Jeff Forrest started. "Yuh're what?" he exploded.

"Askin' for my time when yuh get back."

"Well, I'll be double damned! Where in tophet did yuh git that fool notion?"

"I been hankerin' to drift a long while," Johnny Craig hedged. "I ain't shook the kinks outa many new trails last four-five years. Reckon it's time I'm travelin'—while my bones still set a saddle easy-like."

Jeff Forrest smothered a curse. He didn't like the sound of Johnny Craig's tone a bit. He thought a lot of the young puncher and, secretly, he had sizable ambitions built up around the youth.

"Yuh're spoutin' a lotta doggoned foolishness, son," Forrest said kindly. "Yuh better git it outa yore head. I don't mind tellin' yuh that yuh're worth a lot to me. Yuh got a good future in front of yuh here—mebbyso better'n yuh think. If it's wages what's botherin' yuh, I'll—"

A QUEER lump caught in Craig's throat. He couldn't remember his own father and, in his secret heart, he'd always looked on old Jeff Forrest with the affection of a son for his sire. It hurt him to have the gruff old cowman think that a question of mere wages could stand between them.

"It—it ain't that, boss," Craig said huskily. "It's just that—Aw, hell! I reckon it'll just be better all around, that's all."

Old Jeff Forrest stared queerly at the young waddy, mulled the situation over in silence. Then, suddenly, a knowing light grew in his faded eyes. His lips quirked in a brief smile.

"Time enough to take a stand after I git back," he said. "Yuh jest sorta ponder it heavy, meantime."

He went on up to the big house then, where he found Ailene curled up like a kitten in a comfortable chair, reading a dog-eared magazine. She looked up in surprise as the old rancher began to snort around the room like an ill-humored grizzly bear.

"Now what's wrong?" she asked dutifully, yawning sleepily. "Did you eat too much for supper again, Dad?"

"Supper be darned," growled old Jeff Forrest. "That young fool Johnny Craig jest told me he aims to cut loose when we git back from the trip."

Ailene sat up very straight then, her yawn cut off abruptly.

"Johnny leaving!" she echoed. "Why—why, what in the world would make him want to do that?"

"I dunno. Got some fool idea, 'bout seein' new trails an' faces. Danged young whippersnappers—allus somethin' to keep a man het up!"

Old Jeff Forrest stamped out of the room, muttering and grumbling to himself. But with his back to Ailene, he indulged in a wide grin.

"That oughta jar her some," he chuckled.

It did jar Ailene—a lot. She was suddenly conscious of a queer, gone feeling in the pit of her stomach. Johnny Craig quitting! Why, it didn't seem possible! He was just about as much a part of the 2-Cross as —as this very chair she was sitting in. The thought of him riding away forever with his clear blue eyes and his good-natured grin made the girl's dark eyes blink rapidly.

She rose then, her face a little pale. She stepped out onto the veranda and looked down toward the bunkhouse. Pale yellow light gleamed in a window. She stood there a long while in the shadows, looking at the light. And

when she came in and went quietly to her room she was still pale, and very, very thoughtful. . . .

Jeff Forrest had his party up at the crack of dawn. To Johnny Craig's practical eye, the white-haired couple, Judge Carson and his wife, were really a little too old to be experiencing the rigors of a horseback trip. But they were determined to go through with it. For almost at the very top of Bear Lodge Peak, which rose blue and mighty in the eastern sky some thirty miles away, rested their only son, Jimmy Carson, a cairn of native rock marking his grave.

Jimmy Carson had been a member of the posse which had run down and cornered "Utah" Storm and his outlaw crew just a year ago. On top of Bear Lodge was a sweet-water spring, bubbling up out of native rock in one of nature's queer freaks. Cornered and desperate, Utah Storm and his renegades had made their final stand around this spring.

There Jimmy Carson had wilted before the outlaws' blazing guns. And there the youthful deputy had been buried. Now, for the first time, Judge Carson and his wife were making a pilgrimage to the spot.

Johnny Craig and Shorty roped out the two easiest gaited mounts on the ranch for the Carsons. Monk Larkin moped about in surly silence, doing little to help beyond looking after his own equipment. When all was in readiness, Craig stepped over and swung open the corral gate.

Shorty led the way out, driving the pack mules before him. Old Jeff Forrest came next, riding between the Carsons. Ailene and Monk Larkin brought up the rear.

Craig kept his eyes on the ground, rolling a quirly with forced nonchalance. Ailene, an odd, sober expression in her eyes, reined in slightly and looked down at him.

"Good-bye, Johnny."

Johnny Craig gave his answer over his shoulder as he turned away.

"Adios!"

Ailene jerked to a halt at the abruptness of his tone. Something seemed to rise in her—rebellion at leaving the young puncher in this cool manner. But Johnny Craig was walking away, his shoulders stiffly erect. There was nothing for Ailene to do but follow the party. And the brooding mood which settled over her did not lift for many hours, despite Monk Larkin's best efforts to coax a smile to her lips. . . .

Johnny Craig went up to the bunkhouse, trying to tell himself he didn't care, knowing that every such thought was but a shallow mockery.

Hours became days and days interminable eons to the young waddy. The 2-Cross seemed the loneliest place under all the sun. Try as he would, Craig could not steer his thoughts into comfortable channels. Pictures of Ailene and Monk Larkin standing, perhaps, on some moonlit crag, engrossed in the exalting mystery of love, tortured him every waking hour. He knew now how much he loved the spirited daughter of Jeff Forrest—

AT sundown on the fourth day of his earthly Gehenna, a welcome break came. Sheriff "Howdy Joe" Shank rode up from Perdido. Howdy Joe, a gaunt, taciturn oldster with weather-seamed face and bleached mustaches, was seldom in a hurry. But this evening, he seemed fairly hopping as he lit down from his lathered bronc.

"Howdy, Joe," Craig greeted him from the bunkhouse door. "How's crime?"

"Plumb a-hellin'!" snapped the lawman. "Listen, Johnny—is Judge Carson and his missus here?"

Craig shook his head in denial. "Old Jeff took 'em up to Bear Lodge yesterday mornin'. They went to visit Jimmy's grave."

The sheriff groaned. Craig felt an alien trickle of fear course along his spine.

"What's up, Joe?" he asked, tensing.

Howdy Joe's face went grim. "Yuh recollect what happened in court the day Judge Carson sentenced Utah Storm and what was left of his coyotes to Yuma for life?"

Johnny Craig nodded vigorously. "Shore do. Utah threatened to gut-shoot the judge if he ever got the chance. But he'll never get that chance. Ain't many to escape from that hell-hole."

"Buzzards kin fly outa most anything," retorted the sheriff. "Utah Storm and 'Spider' Hogan escaped six days ago. I got a report they're head-in' this way. They raided the Broken Bow outfit, killed three hands an' stole guns and hosses. They're on the trail of the judge this very minute! 'Latigo' Blake told me he saw Storm an' a pack of gún-slammers foggin' toward Bear Lodge about daybreak this mornin'. I figgered Storm might be headin' back there 'cause he mighta had the loot cached up there—that money he got in the Perdido bank holdup. I see now he's got wise, somehow, to old Jeff takin' the judge up to Jimmy's grave. He's goin' to try to make good on his boast."

Johnny Craig's lean form had grown taut as he listened. Now his browned young face became bleak and hard as granite.

"I reckon you an' me better be ridin', Howdy Joe," he said softly. . . .

Ten miles from the base of Bear Lodge, Johnny Craig and the sheriff struck into the broken country which formed the flanks of the mountains. Here, Howdy Joe relinquished the lead to the puncher who knew the country like a book. Up ridges and down, into gulches and out again, Craig never once faltered.

It was growing dark now, with the crest of the crag towering austere and cold against the graying sky. Johnny Craig pressed on. Gradually the slope of the land tilted upward. Then it levelled out onto a sort of tableland, broken with little mesas and buttes. Here the laboring horses made faster time.

Soon the walls of Bear Lodge Peak loomed just ahead. Craig and the lawman scudded through clumps of lodgepole pines, skirted towering firs. A gorge cut across their path and into it Craig spurred his lathered bronc.

The gorge seemed to run into the very breast of the mountain. Its sides grew higher and steeper. It was black in there, black as the innermost corner of Hades. But the sure-footed range ponies tore along without slackening their pace. At the head of the cut the trail up the crag began. Sheriff Howdy Joe spurred up beside the waddy.

"We'll take it cautious-like when we hit the uptrail," he said. "Mebbe we kin slip up on Storm from behind an' work a surprise."

"My idea, too," returned Craig grimly.

Abruptly a gun muzzle winked redly from the darkness beside the trail. It was a signal. All at once the night seemed to explode with the snarling roar of ambush guns. The air was filled with the demoniacal scream of lead. In their eagerness, Johnny Craig and the lawman had ridden smack into a gun-trap!

THE darkness, and the speed at which they were traveling, alone saved them from that first murderous fusillade. In some miraculous manner, they swept through that first hail of lead without a scratch.

Craig yanked his horse up hard, dragging at his gun. It seemed that to go ahead was impossible. Utah Storm and his gunnies formed a seemingly impregnable ambush between the young waddy and the girl he loved. Yet, to Johnny Craig, the impossible was just that much better target to try his iron on. He crouched low over the neck of his bronc, buried his spurs.

Howdy Joe's protest was drowned

in the thunderous bellow of gunfire. The sheriff swore luridly. But one thing was certain—he didn't intend to let the fighting young waddy breast that ambush alone. With a wild cry, he dug in his spurs, clamped the reins between his teeth and unlimbered the big .45 six-shooters at his hips.

Fierce gushing powderflame blasted from the two charging horsemen. It was blind shooting, but effective enough to unnerve the renegades, who hadn't counted on that reckless surge.

Craig felt one of the outlaws go down beneath the flailing hoofs of his mount. Another cried out shrilly, wilted as the waddy's gun coughed death. The narrow, Stygianlike gorge caught up the crashing echoes and flung them back in a mighty roar of thunder. Lead-ridden flashes spatted against rocks, went whining off into space.

Unseen fingers plucked at Craig's shirt, jarred his saddle. He rode on with grim-set jaw, thumbing his gun-hammer with desperate strength. A savage thrill of triumph jarred along his nerves as he neared the end of the flaming death trap. And then he cursed, as a gray cloud moved reluctantly across the face of the moon, to light up the gorge faintly in an eerie theatre of menacing shadows.

Suddenly a tongue of crimson muzzle flame licked out almost in the puncher's face. Craig felt the wind of the bullet in its passing. Cursing at the missed shot, a grim-faced drygulcher charged out into the trail, the pale moon dimly lighting his thin-lipped features. Pointblank he fired at the waddy.

Johnny Craig, however, had caught in the nick of time the man's foolhardy break. Like a striking snake his gun lined out for the killer's heart, sent smoking lead on its death journey. The outlaw jerked up as if an uppercut had smashed his jaw, then crumpled groundward, the gun spinning out of his hand.

Several yards behind him, around a slight turn in the cut, Craig heard Howdy Joe gasp out, heard the lawman's gun crash flame. Something thrashed the brush to the right of the trail. Howdy Joe grunted a pained note of triumph and spurred on his mount. Johnny Craig dug steel into his bronc then, and abruptly they were out of the gorge.

Craig slowed, glanced back. Howdy Joe was hunched queerly over the saddle-horn, his face a sickly yellow. The young waddy made as though to stop, but the grizzled lawman waved him on.

"Keep goin', yuh crazy fool!" rasped the sheriff. "I'm jest nicked. Those back-shootin' skunks'll be yammerin' at our heels in another minute or two!"

Back down the cut Craig could hear the angry curses of the outlaws. He glanced again at the lawman, then urged his horse to the steep, twisting trail.

Gradually they rose into a world of measureless black bulk on one hand, as the moon went back behind a cloud. Johnny Craig had been over this trail several times before. There were spots where a misstep would send horse and rider crashing to death on sheer rocks a thousand feet below. So he didn't look down. His head was lifted, gaze searching the dim haze of the crest. Up there, somewhere, was old Jeff Forrest and his party—and Ailene!

Hours it seemed to the waddy before his horse gave a last heave and lifted onto the comparative level of the crest of Bear Lodge. Behind him, Howdy Joe's mount topped the rise. With a gusting sigh, the veteran lawman toppled from his saddle. . . .

DAWN found a weary, hollow-eyed group behind a rough barricade of rock which they had hastily

thrown up around Sweetwater Spring. Johnny Craig, who had carried Sheriff Howdy Joe Shank in his arms from the crest of the trail to the camp, was the only man not wounded.

Jeff Forrest limped from a bullet in his thigh. Judge Carson's ribs were thickly bandaged. But aside from the sheriff, Shorty Peters suffered the most serious injury. Blood-crusted bandages hid the wicked bullet gash in his scalp. His face was flushed, his eyes burned feverishly. He was beginning to mutter in delirium.

Ailene and the judge's wife were uninjured, but the strain of their experience showed clearly in their wan faces and haunted eyes. When Craig had first shouted his identity through the darkness of the night, Ailene had rushed out to meet him. She had said nothing, but her hand had gripped his arm fiercely.

Old Jeff Forrest exploded when the puncher's queries touched on Monk Larkin.

"Don't mention that damned yeller coyote to me!" he snarled. "He caved at the very start of the mixup—walked out with his hands clawin' air. Utah Storm's men took him off with 'em. I hope they string the white-livered skunk on a greased rope!"

Over a frugal breaakfast, the rancher further acquainted Craig with the details of the attack.

"They come on us 'bout one o'clock yesterday," he explained. "Hadn't been for one of the hosses whickerin', they'd have surprised us complete. When the hoss bugled, Shorty walked over to the head of the trail. He recognized Utah Storm instant. They swapped shots an' Shorty got a coupla Storm's men. It held 'em back for a time, gave us a chance to throw up a little defense.

"Then they tried a rush. It was hot work. Monk Larkin, I told yuh, quit cold; but Shorty, the judge an' me made it plenty warm for Storm's crowd, even if they did cut a chunk outa each of us. Damn it, I wish Howdy Joe had brought a posse!"

"Didn't figger we had time," Craig said. "But mebbe we won't need any. Mebbe Storm will figger he can't waste any more time tryin' to get the judge. He knows there'll be a prison posse hot on his heels."

Old Jeff Forrest snorted. "Don't yuh ever think it, son. Storm an' Spider Hogan are the kind of gents who wouldn't sluff a chance for revenge if all of hell's imps were trompin' on their tails!"

Sober-faced, grim-lipped, Johnny Craig rose, picked up a Winchester and moved cautiously to the head of the trail. He looked down. Not a chance in a thousand that way. If the little group attempted a getaway down the trail the renegades would pick them off like flies.

CRAIG circled the peak. The east and north sides were hopeless, breaking off into perpendicular drops that fell away to breath-taking distances. He passed on to the south side. Here the peak sloped away in a quickening descent, out along a steep, rocky shoulder that was matted a yard deep in weathered rubble and rock which ended at the lip of the gorge where the renegades were encamped. Craig could see the faint blue fan of smoke from their campfire, rising above the rim of the gorge.

Hunkered down on a rock, he rolled and lighted a cigarette. Frustration rode him hard. There didn't seem to be a ghost of a chance for the beleaguered little band. Another determined charge by the outlaws, under cover of darkness, would spell finish.

Johnny Craig tossed his quirly below him onto the slope. Moodily he flipped bits of rock at the cigarette where it lay in a crevice of loose talus. Then one of those bits of rock struck a finely balanced fragment that rolled

loose. In a moment, the falling chunks had picked up several other stones, while a thread of finer fragments hissed along in a miniature slide, that played out in another moment against a heavy boulder.

SUDDENLY Johnny Craig stiffened. His eyes glittered, searching the slope carefully.

"Mebbe—mebbe it *could* be done!" he breathed hoarsely.

He stood up, eyes flitting here and there across the slope. Aside from a single warped and scraggly pinon, which somehow clung to the slope not ten yards from the brink of the gorge, not a single growing thing was visible.

The rest of the slope was made up of big and smaller rocks, dust and fragments, built up into their present formation through uncounted eons by wind and sun and storm. Ten thousand miniature slides had swept down from the peak to form that rock-strewn surface on the sheer, hard face of the slope. Maybe—

Johnny Craig whirled, and hurried back to the barricade. Old Jeff Forrest, observing his rapid approach, caught up a Winchester.

"They comin' ag'in?" he rasped desperately.

Craig shook his head. "No," he clipped, "but there's a slim chance for us to wriggle outa this mess. I aim to try it, pronto."

He headed for his horse, catching up his saddle as he went. He paused a moment beside Howdy Joe, who was resting as comfortably as possible in the doubtful shade of the barricade. The lawman was unconscious, his breathing quick and irregular. Shorty tossed restlessly beside him, muttering unintelligibly. Craig stood beside them a moment in silence. Then his shoulders stiffened, his lean steel-and-rawhide body tensed with desperate resolve.

As he finished saddling, Ailene came over to him. Her hand touched his arm lightly.

"Johnny," she said softly, "what are you going to try? You—you can't break through those human beasts if you're thinking of riding for help."

Craig's lips twitched in a brief smile. "I'm goin' for help," he said bleakly; "but not the kind yuh think."

Old Jeff Forrest came up just then. "What's on yore mind, son?" he demanded.

Johnny Craig shook his head. His scheme was too reckless. If he revealed it now, the old man and Ailene wouldn't let him try it. Quickly he swung into saddle.

"Adios," he said; and before they could offer further protest, he set spurs to his mount.

Ailene and her father ran after him, but they stopped when they saw him force his bronc over the crest of Bear Lodge onto the talus slope. He had his horse twenty yards down, working it into position, when the ranch owner and the girl ran forward again. They realized then what the fighting young waddy was going to attempt.

Old Jeff Forrest cursed helplessly. Ailene's face turned a sickly white and her hands went to her lips to stifle a scream.

"Come back, Johnny!" she cried. "Johnny—*stop!*"

Craig steadied his trembling horse. A cold, still calmness settled over him, nerving him for what lay ahead. Deftly he urged the frightened mount into the apex of the huge fan of slide-rock.

The faithful bronc went on, steadied by the spirit of its grim-faced rider. At the backbone of the slide, Johnny Craig settled himself firmly in saddle, looped the reins about his left wrist and leaned forward, burying his spurs.

With plunging, terrified leaps, the bronc surged across the slope, stirring and jarring the breast of the slide, driving the weight of itself and its rider against that finely poised

rock surface. It seemed sheer, mad folly that a mere thousand pounds could stir those thousands of tons of shattered rock and talus to movement.

Dust rose, fine and powdery. With iron hand and grim determination, Johnny Craig drove his bronc again and again into the slide. Was he to fail? Was this great mass of stone too securely locked to the hard surface underneath to move? It seemed so. It seemed to the waddy that his efforts were puny, hopelessly futile.

AGAIN he lifted his bronc in a wild plunge; and then again, desperately. Of a sudden, somewhere in the shadowed depths rose an awesome rumble of thunder—the growl of a mountain giant, stirred from a million years of slumber to titanic action.

Johnny Craig flashed a quick glance about. It seemed the whole side of the mountain was flowing beneath him, like a molten bed of lava. Its speed increased. A curtain of blinding dust churned up. The waddy strained his eyes, trying to pick up that single gnarled pinon. He glimpsed it, set his horse to lurching at an angle across the slide toward the tree.

It was a mad, dizzy world now, gyrating crazily; a world that slipped treacherously beneath horse and rider; a world that roared and groaned and thundered its chant of angry protest. A dozen times, it seemed, the maddened bronc stumbled. Each time, Craig kept it on its feet by sheer strength alone.

By this time, boulders were catapulting into the gorge. Shouts of alarm came abruptly from the surprised outlaws. The stream of boulders thickened, became a veritable rain of death. A horse screamed horribly as a heavy stone snapped its spine like a birch twig.

Carried almost to the brink of the gorge, Johnny Craig picked out one of the outlaws far below, saw him leap to the bare back of a horse. It was Monk Larkin. But before the traitorous 2-Cross rider had gone five paces, a slab of weathered granite crushed screaming horse and rider beneath its weight.

Utah Storm, calling his men around him, sought the opposite side of the gorge, striving to escape that torrent of crashing death. But like inexorable doom the slide came on, piling higher and higher, smothering terrified curses, battering human flesh, crushing, burying—wiping out the entire outlaw crew.

Up above, dazed and stunned by the awesome cataclysm he had caused, Johnny Craig fought desperately toward the gnarled pinon. Now it was only a splintered stump, its branches and scanty foliage battered and torn from it. But it seemed to hold valiantly; stood out against the cloud of rock dust like the prow of some indomitable ship, as the heavier boulders and rocks swept past.

Craig marked the distance and drove his heaving bronc on. The current of the slide began to roll past them. With a last desperate effort, Craig flung himself headlong from saddle, his left hand still gripping the reins, his right arm crooked and clutching.

The curve of that groping arm found the stump, hugged it close. Craig's horse drifted past, swung around under the hard pull of the reins. Frantically the gallant animal floundered and lunged, pawing the sliding talus behind it. To Craig, it seemed that his arms were being dragged from their sockets as he held on grimly to his mount. His left wrist felt severed by the stricture of the reins.

Yet he held fast, determined not to desert the strong-hearted bronc that had carried him to safety. Gradually the strain lessened, the jarring roar

of the avalanche softened. Then silence, like a benediction, closed down on Bear Lodge Peak, broken only by an old man's heavy sigh, a girl's soft sobbing.

IT was a fortnight later. In Perdido, under the care of Doc Stahl, Sheriff Howdy Joe Shank was slowly recovering from the wound in his chest. Judge Carson hopped spryly about his office. Back at the 2-Cross ranch, old Jeff Forrest was very much his old self again.

Shorty Peters, a clean scalp bandage tipping his sombrero at a jaunty angle, was down in the branding corral again, helping Johnny Craig put the iron to a few late steers. Ailene was there, too, perched on the top rail of the corral.

"May I come down and help?" she called, an impish twinkle in her eyes.

Johnny Craig straightened, grinning boyishly, and walked over to the rail.

"Yuh'll have to take yore chances on one of these oreana thunderbolts goin' on the prod," he told her, a roguish light in his eyes.

Ailene pretended to frown.

"But I really like taking chances," she protested.

Craig laughed. "Yuh can't take chances without payin' a toll," he said. "The toll today is a kiss."

Ailene didn't hesitate. She paid her toll, with several advance payments to insure the future. As for Shorty, the runty little cowpoke winked at the whiteface stretched out for branding. He'd have sworn the dogie winked back.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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RANGE BUDDIES BECOME RODEO RIVALS

IN

ALL-AROUND CHAMPION

A Rollicking Western Story by BERT A. SANDBORGH

MEET "SAWTOOTH HARRY" THE RAZOR BLADE PHILOSOPHER

Says Sawtooth Harry: LISTEN, BROTHER . . .
DON'T YOU NEVER, NEVER TRY A TWENTY GRAND RAZOR BLADE! WHY? BECAUSE THEY'RE HABIT-FORMING

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WORLD'S PRODUCTS COMPANY, Spencer, Ind.

TRAIL CAMP

A Department Conducted by

FOG HORN CLANCY

WELL, here we are folks, pushing our way right up to the RANGE RIDERS campfire to palaver with you hands that are not going on night herd. About all you can do, I guess, is just listen. My mother used to tell me that she was unable to determine whether my gift of gab was a failing or an accomplishment.

I don't want to appear as a bunkhouse "Windy"—you know nearly every bunkhouse of any size has one—and while I'll admit that I often talk long and loud, I want to tell you folks about things that has happened, is happening and is going to happen in the realm of the West, the cowboy and the Westerner.

You know, I've been knocking around this country with cowboys and cowgirls for more than forty years now. A fellow would have to be even dumber than I am not to remember things that would bear telling again.

"Button-Button!"

When I am West I think it's the greatest part of this great country of ours, and when I am East I wonder why so many bronc riders left the West and came East when they were young men. About one out of every ten you meet used to be a bronc rider, so they claim. Just trying to show a friendly spirit and make a fellow feel good, I guess.

Speaking of bronc riders, I remember a time about fifteen years ago when I was down on the 101 Ranch in Oklahoma. We were preparing for the roundup, or rodeo, and Miller Brothers used to hire a lot of boys or men just drifting through the country. In fact, a fellow could always get a job on the 101, for at that time it was the biggest diversified farm and ranch in the United States. There was always potatoes to be dug, peaches or other fruit to be gathered, and numerous other things that required only a strong back, a willing hand and average intelligence.

When a fellow got a job on the ranch he was furnished with a nickel button or kind of badge upon which was stamped "Employee Miller Bros. 101 Ranch." It had a serial number, and you was charged fifty cents for the button—which amount was returnable when your services terminated and the button returned.

But it would surprise you to know how few of those buttons were ever returned. They were kept as souvenirs. Many a fellow, whether his work had been picking peaches or gathering watermelons, was a full-fledged cowboy and a champion bronc rider when he left there—with that button.

Well, to get back to the story, I had driven into Ponca City six miles from the ranch on some business pertaining to the rodeo. On the return trip, when about a mile out of town, I was hailed by one of the boys who proudly displayed his button and asked if I was going out toward the ranch, and could he ride with me. He didn't know who I was and I didn't know who he was, so we were even. But when he got into the car he started the conversation.

Regular Man-Killer

Yes sir, he was the greatest bronc rider that ever straddled a sunfishing cayuse. Why, he could remember one time back in Baltimore, when he and his partner were just passing through, that they heard of a horse that was really bad. That horse was so bad a bucker that he had bucked off every fellow that ever won first money in the bronc riding contest at Cheyenne Frontier Days.

I wondered how come all these winners, riding the same horse and how come this horse to wander off so far from home. But I knew at the rate this fellow was talking I'd soon get the entire story. He seemed encouraged by my silence and continued.

Well, he and his partner went to see this horse and the man who owned the cayuse. A great crowd quickly gathered, and while he would have been willing to ride the steed just for the fun of it, his partner said, "Bill,

they want this hoss rid pretty bad, and they'll pay to see him rid."

Whereupon he became money mad and asked them fifteen dollars to fit a ride on their sunfisher. To his amazement they agreed.

Again my own string of thoughts wandered for a moment trying to figure out where that was so much for riding a regular man-killer; one that had made so many great riders bite the dust. By this time, though, this fellow's got the horse saddled and in this conversation ride of his he is just getting into the saddle. I screwed down in the seat of the auto and held the wheel with both hands. I knew this was going to be some ride.

Now I know none of you have been figuring that this bird is going to get bucked off; neither did I. He made a wonderful ride. He raked that cayuse from shoulder to flank, but he tossed on that last straw, the one that broke the camel's back when he said, "Would you believe it, that horse bucked with me for three solid hours?"

Quick as a flash I'm thinking what a dumb lot we rodeo folks have been, limiting a bronc rider to ten seconds, when one bronc ride like that would make a whole afternoon's performance or a whole rodeo. Then I came back to earth. I shoved in the clutch and braked the car to a quick stop.

"Pardner," I said, "it's a good thing that that was a long story and I am a fast driver. It's only about a mile from here to the ranch, but this is where you get out. Wess and Bill should be along here pretty soon with the herd of broncs from the north pasture. Just grab any one of them and ride him to the ranch. A bronc rider like you don't need no saddle, halter or anything. I'd stay and pick out Joe's prize bucker, Crying Squaw, for you, but I'm in a hurry."

Tenderfoot "Buster"

There was a time, however, when a tenderfoot outwitted a whole bunch of us. That was at the rodeo in Magdalena, New Mexico, in 1918. "Tex" Austin, a great rodeo producer, was handling the rodeo. How time flies! That was twenty-one years ago, and Tex has crossed the Great Divide. He headed for the last roundup last October 26th.

It was the night before the opening day of the rodeo and we were taking entries. We had just one room for an office and only about three chairs. Most of the hands had already entered and there was quite a few sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall and spitting at a tobacco box cuspidor which was in the center of the floor; mostly engaged in "riding broncs in the office" as

MEET FOG HORN CLANCY

Fog Horn Clancy

STEP up an' shake with your new SEGUNDO! "Fog Horn" Clancy is one of the best rodeo men what ever throwed a rope. You'll meet up with him in these pages right frequently, an' also in our companion magazine, WEST. He'll dish out some swell news and notes of rodeo and ranch activities all over the country—fresh chuck, pipin' hot, in every issue.

Fog Horn was born on a Texas ranch and got his name by being especially energetic as a newsboy later on in his youth. Being gifted with a natural far-reaching voice, he became an announcer and caller of events at riding and roping contests.

For forty-one years he's known the excitement of the West, the thrill of bucking bronchos, an' all that goes with ranch life. He can tell many a yarn of gunsmoke and danger—and will regale you with plenty in the months to come. Besides, he's the country's most famous rodeo expert and handicapper, and will keep you well-posted. So be listenin'.

we usually called those before the rodeo gabfests.

Present in the group besides myself and Tex, were Leonard Stroud, Bud Clayton, Tex Parker, Red Sublett, and several others including Jim Wilkes and "Curley" Griffith. Both those last two were swell hands who have long since passed on.

I was taking the entries and at that time the entrance fee that Austin charged was only ten dollars to enter anything and everything that a hand wanted to enter. Except steer roping and the wild horse race both of which had a separate entrance fee.

In came a fellow whose manner of dress and speech stamped him as a tenderfoot, and asked what it cost to enter the bronco busting. I told him, he promptly paid the amount, signed his name, got his receipt and his arm number and walked out. Nary a squirt of tobacco juice had been aimed at the tobacco box while this fellow was in the office. The cowboys just sat and stared.

Bronc Rider Gerald

Jim Wilkes was first to break the silence after the latest entry had left the room.

"Who is that fellow?" he asked.

"Gerald So-and-So," I replied.

"Where's he from?" Wilkes wanted to know.

I consulted the entry sheet again and replied, "Norfolk, Virginia."

Jim came back with, "What's he doin' here?"

I had to laugh. "Riding broncs," I answered. "He has paid his entrance fee. Can't he ride broncs if he wants to?"

Then this quaint character, Jim Wilkes, came up off the floor.

"Hell, Fog," he said, "I ain't deaf, dumb or blind and I can understand some English, but what I am tryin' to get through my head is why this fellow that anybody could tell is a tenderfoot would come out here where they raise bronc riders like they do cattle in herds, and enter a bronc riding contest—and with a name like that. Who ever heard of a bronc rider named Gerald?"

I had to confess that I did not believe he was a bronc rider and did not know why a fellow who looked slightly weakly and with skin that looked like it had seldom been exposed to the sun and wind should be entering a bronc riding contest where there was plenty of tough bronc scratchers. Then with the business of arranging the program and drawing stock, Gerald was for the time forgotten.

The next day just before the bronc riding, I came upon Gerald and pointed out to him the bronc he had drawn for the contest. This bronc happened to be one of the poorest buckers in the string. And this would have been considered bad luck by any of the other bronc riders, as the horse did not rate a winning ride.

I found that Gerald owned no chaps, boots, spurs or saddle, but the boys quickly loaned him the necessary articles. Leonard Stroud saddled the horse for him.

Not According to the Rules

Gerald's ride was the second on the program. Stroud saw that he gathered in just the right length of rein, that his feet were in the stirrups properly and when Gerald was ready gave the order to turn him out. The moment the chute gates were opened Gerald dropped the reins and grabbed the pommel of the saddle with both hands. By the time the horse had made a couple of jumps the judge blew the whistle as a signal that the rider had disqualified. The pickup man rode in and grabbed the reins to stop the horse from bucking and to allow the rider to dismount.

Gerald had been popped pretty well all over the saddle, but had retained a deathlike grip on the pommel and had not been thrown. As he dismounted and started back toward the chutes I approached him.

"Fellow," I said, "don't you know you can't win anything at a bronc riding contest, riding like that? You deliberately threw your reins away and disqualified before the horse started bucking."

Gerald looked at me and laughed. "Mister," he said. "I'm not riding to your rules, or riding for your purses. I'm touring the West with some wealthy friends of mine and I bet them five hundred dollars that I could ride one of your broncs. I have won my bet, now I'm going to buy a box seat and watch your rodeo."

"Dog gone," said Jim Wilkes who had strolled up right behind me. "He is still a tenderfoot, but he's shore a smart one."

Millionaire Rodeo Fan

Tom L. Burnett, millionaire rancher and former rodeo producer, died at his home in Iowa Park, Texas, on December 26th. He was well known to rodeo contestants throughout the country and to ranchers over Texas and the Southwest.

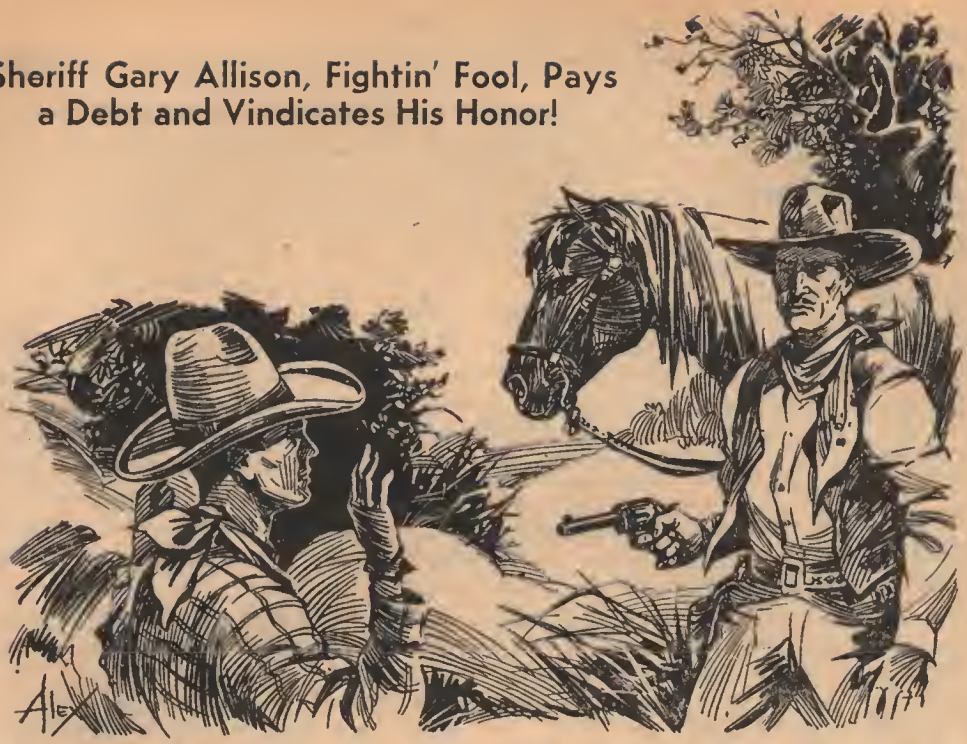
Burnett was sixty-seven years old at the time of his death. He was a son of the late S. Burk Burnett who owned the immense Four Sixes Ranch and for whom the Texas oil town, Burkburnett, was named.

While the elder Burnett who died some fifteen years ago left a fortune estimated at about sixteen million dollars, Tom was already a millionaire in his own right. Having left his father's ranch where he drew a puncher's salary of forty dollars a month, Tom went into the cattle business for himself with capital furnished by M. Sansom Sr., of Fort Worth, and cleared eighteen thousand dollars the first year. Afterward he acquired the Triangle Ranch of twenty-seven thousand acres between Iowa Park and Electra. Then came the oil boom and more than four hundred oil wells were drilled on the Triangle.

At the time of his death Tom's ranches

(Continued on page 127)

Sheriff Gary Allison, Fightin' Fool, Pays a Debt and Vindicates His Honor!



A sardonic grin twitched the corners of the Nevada Kid's mouth as he leveled on the sheriff

OVERDUE

By FRANK CARL YOUNG

Author of "Outlaw Blood," "Showdown Hut," etc.

SHERIFF GARY ALLISON was not a tall man nor an old one, but he looked shorter than ever and anything but twenty-five this morning. He stood in the dim cell-block beyond his office, his lean shoulders sagging in his sharp, piercing blue eyes staring unbelievingly at the wide-open door to the strongest cell in the little cow-town of Adamina. It was the one in which he had let Ranger Collins put his prisoner the night before—the Nevada Kid.

"Looks damn bad fer yuh, sheriff," said Collins, who was built like a mesquite branch and looked as if he would snap off at his cartridge-studded waist if he stooped over. "Yuh're the only one who has keys and it was your keys that opened that cell. Folks are sure gonna figure yuh let him out."

Allison knodded grimly and solemnly picked up the bunch of keys from his scarred desk. The jangle of them was unheard above the din of voices on the cattle-town's plank sidewalk outside. Loudest and coarsest of all was the voice of Dever Roswell, owner of six thousand head and as many acres in Adamina Valley. Roswell was pointing out to the crowd in damning phrases the inefficiency and evident crookedness of the man they had elected two years before. He also made clear that the notorious Nevada Kid had once saved the life of Allison, that without a doubt the sheriff had squared his debt by freeing the marauding outlaw.

"Waal, I caught the Kid once and I can do it again," rasped Collins, tucking in his shirt, for when the alarm spread that the Kid had escaped, he had left his hotel room next door without diligent care in dressing. "Only this time I ain't plantin' him in yore barhouse. But I've got to git hime 'fore he reaches his stronghold at Vallio. That ghost-town is a death-hole, and I ain't aimin' to trail him inside!"

"That's the only place you'll git him, Collins," advised Allison. "He'll head fer there right off."

As Collins went out, Roswell and Chuck Garret pushed in. Behind them came Roswell's foreman, Sieber, a short man with a quick temper and a fast trigger finger. With the door still ajar, a group of grim-featured townsmen figured it was an open invitation and wedged inside.

Allison waited for them in the middle of the floor. His spurred heels were widespread, his arms akimbo, the muscles of his block-like jaw white and bulging. The tight, pointed expressions on their faces told him much.

"We oughta throw yuh out. Sheriff!" blared Roswell, his small, dark eyes hidden more than ever by his thick and bushy brows. "Every lawman in the state would give ten years of his life to get the Nevada Kid in his jug—and you free him!"

"Throw him out, anyway!" ranted Sieber, and as he spoke he maneuvered so that he was behind Chuck Garret. "He ain't doin' us any good around here! Garret is the man who should have been sheriff!"

ALLISON remembered his father, and the years of service he had given the cattle-town. It was due to his father's record that he had been elected over Garret two years before. It had always been his hope to equal his father's ability, but now—

A well-pleased grin tickled the corners of Garret's wide, loose mouth. His eyes danced as they watched Allison suffer before the towns-folk.

"I reckon folks know now that they made a mistake at the last election," he sand, his Ajax figure towering a full foot above Allison and swelling as he spoke. "They won't make any at the next one. This washes you up!"

Allison saw the futility in explaining that someone had robbed him of his keys while he slept in his room in the shack on the outskirts of town; that he had pursued the intruder as quickly as he could get dressed. But he couldn't prove it. Besides, they had all the proof they wanted with that empty cell behind him and the jangling keys in his hand.

"Let's move him now!" cried Sieber, exposing his gun-hip by moving a few inches from behind Garret.

Allison's piercing blue eyes hardened, then glared through fiery slits. With a blurred movement, he heaved the heavy keys into Sieber's hatchet-like features, then cleared his gun.

The tiny office trembled under the smash of his Colt. Above the roar of it came Sieber's screaming curse, as his gun was smashed from his fingers and sent spinning against the wall.

Allison's face was bloodless with fury. "Now git this, all of you!" he grated angrily, his eyes darting over the mass of brown faces. "The Nevada Kid escaped because someone around here is a better key thief than cowman. I know yuh're all thinkin' I let the Kid go because he saved my life once. But yuh're wrong—and I know a way to prove it!"

Roswell laughed devisively. "I suppose the Kid is gonna come back an' tell us somebody else let him out, eh?"

"Nope! I'm goin' to Vallio and git the Kid to tell me, Roswell!"

THE glory of Adamina Pass was lost on Allison as he rode the gray, dusty cattle trail and treaded between the sharp, towering rock walls. Strewn boulders and heaps of shale on either side were unseen, and the panoramic

splendor of the green valley beyond into which he rode failed to exist for him this morning.

He neither saw nor heard anything; he only remembered. Remembered another morning very much like this one a year ago. It was the morning he had pursued the Nevada Kid across the grass flats to the Puerco River, the one and only time the Kid had ever entered his county.

He had nearly caught the Kid, but the swollen Puerco River caught Allison instead, nearly drowning him. Thanks to a quick rope throw by the outlaw, he lived to hear the Kid tell him that he hated water more than he did the law, that he hoped the next time he met the sheriff the latter would have dry guns.

All this and much more Allison remembered as he loped southward from Adamina Pass toward Vallio, the Kid's ghost-town fortress. He felt remorse over the fact that he must seek out the man who had saved his life and whose life he might now be forced to take. For he knew that should he find the Kid it would be a gun-duel. The Kid had promised that a year ago.

Following the worn cattle train, the sheriff dipped down through scrub-oak and came out on a tiny, misquite-dotted plateau. Taking a faint deer trail that showed sign, he swung off to the left toward a shallow basin where the glitter of water shone through the clump of oak trees that squatted in its middle.

Ten yards from the fringe of trees he suddenly jerked as the crash of a gun shattered the thick silence glutting the basin. For an instant Allison paused, then he buried the spurs and pounded into the trees.

In the trail that wound beside the gurgling stream a tall, thin figure with washish waist lay sprawled face down. Beside it waited a familiar horse. Allison swore as he recognized Ranger Collin's white-faced calico.

Shooting a quick, anxious glance at the trees bordering the shadowed trail, Allison dismounted and stooped to turn Collins over on his back.

"Yore guns dry this time, Sheriff?"

Allison stiffened at the sound of the familiar but grim voice behind him. Turning slowly, he saw a man approaching from the thicket beyond the horse. It was the Nevada Kid, a six-shooter in his hand and leveled on the sheriff. A sardonic grin twitched the corners of his thin mouth as he came to a halt at the horse's shoulder.

"S'funny, never doped it that yuh'd hit my trail again after last year. Jes' goes to show yuh how bad I've been figurin' things lately," said the Kid. For a moment he stood there, stiff and cautious, like a panther tensed for springing. Then moving a foot closer to Allison, he spoke grimly:

"If yuh don't want the same dose I gave Collins there, do as I say!"

ALLISON'S mouth was dry as a wad of cotton. Words weren't coming easy. Not because he was staring steadily into the black snout of the Kid's gun. But because he was reading a peculiar kind of sensitiveness and pain in the Kid's sharp angular features.

"I ain't forgot the Puerco River, Nevada," he finally managed. But I had to hit yore trail so's to find out who rammed the key in yore cell lock this mornin'. And I'm findin' out one way or another!"

The worried look remained on the Kid's face as he slowly dug his free hand into his vest pocket. He glanced quickly at a mother-of-pearl button between his fingers. Dropping it back into his pocket, he gave a shrill whistle, and a second later a gleaming black horse splashed across the stream from the dense trees lining the opposite bank.

"Don't know the gent's name, Sheriff," said the Kid, catching the reins in his free hand. "Couldn't git it past my teeth even if I did know."

Allison understood. It was the Kid's

code. He didn't squawk on those who helped him. Killer and marauder he might be, but coursing through the same blood was a strain of something finer, something admirable.

He immediately appealed to that strain in the Kid. In detail he explained the importance of clearing the charge against himself, that someone was knifing him in the back in order to gain power in Adamina. But when he finished the Kid merely laughed.

"Pretty speech, Sheriff," he sniffed, his eyes abruptly glittering like cut gems. "Now climb yore rig and don't make any funny passes, or I'll stretch yuh out. Yuh see, yuh came along kinda handy-like. I need you. Yuh're goin' to Vallio whether yuh like it or not. Meantime, I'm handin' yuh a speech somethin' like yores, only prettier!"

"Mebby I jes' ain't anxious to go," purred Allison grimly.

The Kid grinned, but he waggled his gun. "Yuh'll go," was all he said.

"Yuh see, I'm gittin' old," explained the Kid, as they rode stirrup to stirrup through the blazing afternoon sun toward the south and the Kid's hideout. "And when yuh git old and jes' a mite slower with the gun, there's always someone in the pack figurin' it's time to smoke yuh down. That's the way it is with my pack. My segundo, Joe Haskins, figures the time's ripe to take over my job.

"He's talked plenty, and the boys are countin' on a new boss. They've swung away from me, got it doped that Haskins is faster, smarter. So yuh see, Allison, like a couple of bucks in the spring, Haskins and me got to fight it out. That's how come I got tripped up by that gent Collins. I was lookin' fer Haskins and kinda forgot the law. It got me."

"But where do I fit in this spring tournament between you and Haskins?" asked Allison bitterly. "Judgin' from the way yuh handled them irons back there, yuh ain't needin' my help."

THE Kid laughed wearily. "It's my gang," he said. "Haskins packs a fast gun, but his tongue is faster. He's convinced most of my men I pulled a job alone, left them out of it. If I ride into Vallio alone there's a good chance I'll get a lead bath before I even see Haskins. That's where you come in. Yuh're goin into Vallio an' bring Haskins out to me. Yuh're goin' to tell him in front of the gang that I'm waitin' outside. He'll have to come, or the bunch will turn on him."

"What if I buck?"

"Yuh don't git the dope on who slipped the key into my cell this mornin'. Not only that, but if yuh buck I'll put holes where yore ribs ought to be!"

Allison cursed. "Why, I ain't got a chance of gittin' out of Vallio once I'm in!"

"That's yore headache, Sheriff. Yuh poked yore self into this, so poke yore way out. But jes' one little tip—hide that tin shingle on yore vest, and mebby yuh'll last long enough to git back to Adamina and square things with yore back-knifing friend."

Sheriff Gary Allison stared hard and deep into the glowing brown eyes of the Nevada Kid. He had no illusions. The outlaw had given him life a year ago, but now he toyed with that same life, played with it like a cat would a mouse, reserving the right to destroy it at will.

There was but one course to follow—enter Vallio.

The ghost town of Vallio lay like a white, gortesque phanton village on the slope above the river. In the moonlight the gutted walls and paneless windows gave the buildings the appearance of creamy skulls keeping a silent watch on the murmuring willows that lined the bank of the glittering river below. Hidden in the shadows of the trees were Allison and the Kid. For an hour they waited until the moon rode high.

"I'll need the light," explained the Kid, as he slowly pulled his guns, spun the chambers, then slid them back into their holsters. Pulling his rifle from the

saddle sheath, he touched Allison's knee with his own. "Now ride in there and remember that the bead on this Winchester'll be on your spine every inch up that slope."

Allison rode grimly toward the silent main street and the ruin of broken buildings. Squares of black instead of lighted windows told him that the town must be deserted of the hellion crew. For a moment hope leaped within him, then immediately fell as he realized that if Haskins wasn't in Vallio he wouldn't be able to square his debt with the kid, and that he would never get the information he wanted.

WITH the bay's pounding hoofs sounding like the muffled beat of drums in the thick dust of the street, Allison rode its full length. Suddenly he yanked the horse to a halt. Ground-reined down a narrow lane stood a mount, the moonlight creaming the polished saddle. From the battered saloon before which it stood, a tiny gleam of light sparkled through the glassless window. Allison stared about for other mounts, or at least a faint sign of some activity. But there was none.

The town seemed to have but one lone occupant. Dismounting, he cautiously slipped to the window and peered in. Standing at the empty bar, hat tipped low over his forehead, was a giant of a man, his thick fingers wrapped around a glass of whiskey, his head sunk low on his chest.

Now and then the man raised his eyes to the huge mirror behind the bar. His lips stirred and he was talking. Faintly the words reached Allison:

" . . . I'm faster than he ever was! I can give him the count of two and still beat him!" The square, thick chin fell. The man's voice became still fainter, almost a sob. "But mebby I'll — I'll slip."

Allison saw him reach for the bottle, quickly pour another drink and down it with a gulp. Up went the chin and again the man faced himself squarely in the mirror.

"Hell, the Kid's older! He can't be as quick as he was a year ago!" The man paused, suddenly stood on the rail, leaned far over the bar until his dark, course features were closer to the mirror. "Damn yuh, Haskins, yuh got to kill him! The gang'll be in at dawn—and yuh got to be the boss!"

Allison hesitated, then abruptly pulled his gun and walked inside. The moment his boot soles scraped the sandy floor, Joe Haskins whirled, knocking the bottle and glass the length of the bar in his mad stab for his guns. He halted with them half-cleared, for Allison's leveled gun was centered on his chest.

"Thought you was—" stammered Haskins, then closed his lips tight.

"Yeh, I know—the Kid," Allison finished for him. "Waal, he's waitin' fer yuh, Haskins. Waitin' fer yuh down by the river."

Haskins' features paled a shade. He shot a quick, hungry glance at the spilled whiskey trickling along the bar.

"Yuh're Sheriff Allison, ain't yuh?" he said. "I knew the Kid wouldn't stay long in your jug. Figured yuh'd remember yuh nearly drowned in the river last spring. That's why I knew damn well the Kid would come here tonight. I've been waitin'—alone."

"Let's go," replied Allison, anxious to have the thing over with.

"Jes' a minute," came Haskin's voice. "I need another drink."

Allison was willing to wait. Another drink for Haskins, and the Kid's chances of killing him were doubled. And with the Kid accomplishing his purpose, Allison knew he was furthering his own end.

HASKINS raised the glass to his thick lips. Held it there for a split second. Suddenly his hand shot out and the burning whiskey splashed full in Allison's eyes. At the same moment Haskins nimbly leaped to one side, yanked his gun.

Allison swore as the whiskey blinded him. Dashing his free hand across his eyes, he yanked the trigger. An instant later, as the crash of his Colt shook the saloon, Haskins' gun bored into his back. Thick, steel-like fingers clamped over his gun wrist.

"Drop that gun!" snarled the outlaw. "Now, lawman, you an' me are headin' fer the river and th' Kid. Only we do it my way. Yuh're gonna be walkin' right in front of me all the time!"

As the gun slipped from Allison's fingers, he realized he had made a mistake. He was to be a shield for Haskins. And when they met the Kid and the Kid's blazing guns . . . He had purposely played along with the Nevada Kid, but now things looked bilious."

As they walked down the slope toward the river, Allison kept rubbing the stinging liquor from his eyes. Gradually he was able to keep them open, to see the moon-swept river below.

Suddenly he saw the Kid emerge from the willows on foot and start up the slope to meet them, his slender arms swinging freely at his sides. Haskins' gun bored deeper into Allison's back.

"If yuh open yore trap before I shoot him, I'll blow yore backbone out yore belly!" he warned.

Allison knew that he was walking to sure death. It was behind him and before him. There was no escaping it. There would be no return to Adamina. There would be nothing but the Kid's bullets ploughing into him.

The Kid suddenly halted about thirty feet from them. He leaned forward, his hands tensed above his guns. Then they lowered, and it seemed that he was puzzled by the misshapen hulk in the moonlight.

"That you, Haskins?" came his voice.

Allison's lungs were bursting to tell the truth. He felt Haskins stir behind him, heard the scrape of metal on leather as the outlaw pulled his gun.

Crash! The treacherous lieutenant fired without warning.

As Haskins' gun spewed flame alongside of Allison's hip, he saw the Kid jerk, then stagger to one side. Again Haskins' gun roared. The Nevada Kid stumbled forward, both hands wrapped around his walnut butts. He plunged to his knees, rocked from side to side, life pouring from him in a red ooze down his vest. With a desperate lurch, he yanked his guns and fell over on one elbow.

Stripes of flame lashed up the slope from the fallen figure. Colt-roars echoed back and forth from the ghost town at the summit. Hot lead creased Allison's shoulder as he leaped to one side, suddenly baring Haskins to the fusillade of lead spewing from the Kid's guns.

Haskins fired again, then turned to shoot Allison. But the raging sheriff grappled with him savagely, gripping and twisting the cowardly killer's gun arm. He turned the weapon upward just as Haskins pulled the trigger, and the outlaw shot himself in the face. He shuddered and pitched headlong.

A tomblike silence settled abruptly over the slope. Running to the prostrate form of the Kid, Allison discovered that he was dead. The kid held but one gun in his fist; in the other, Allison caught the glint of moonlight on something shiny.

IT was the mother-of-pearl button.

Allison frowned over it a moment, then suddenly cried out. It was the answer! For he knew that the Kid had had two guns in his fists. Now he had but one, and in his free hand he held a button. He had come through with the bargain he made. He was telling Allison in a silent way the answer he needed!

Sheriff Allison clutched the button and started north toward Adamina, the moonlight gleaming on the red blotch at his shoulder

"Okay, Kid," he said tersely. "Yuh're

square all around. I hope yuh figger I am."

The sheriff's office in Adamina was almost crowded the following morning. Striding anxiously back and forth, his small eyes completely sunken beneath his puckered bushy brows, Dever Roswell repeatedly glared at Chuck Garret and Sieber lounging comfortably in the only two chairs the office boasted beside the leather-backed one in which Sheriff Gary Allison now sat. On the plank sidewalk outside, a group of anxious townsmen waited. Waited to see why Roswell, Garret and Sieber were inside the office of a man who had not been expected to come back from Vallio.

Allison sat in his father's chair, felt the strength of his father surging through him. He studied his three guests with cool deliberation.

"Had you boys come here to tell yuh somethin'," he began. "You were right about the folks of Adamina makin' a mistake in one of their candidates last election. They won't make it again."

Roswell beamed, stepped forward. "The sensible thing to do is resign, Sheriff," he said. "Yuh kin see—"

"The Nevada Kid's dead," Allison continued. "But he asked me to do him a favor and return somethin' he stole from the gent who freed him." With a quick movement, Allison tossed the mother-of-pearl vest button on the desk.

Garret's eyes bulged and he flung his hand to his vest where a button was missing. He stabbed a frantic glance at Allison, then swept his terrorized gaze to Roswell. Gulping, he sprang to his feet and cried:

"He made me do it, Allison! Roswell needed to have me in office to make his power complete! I'd never have robbed yore room that night if Roswell hadn't—"

ROSWELL cursed, turned beet red. The next instant his gun leaped from leather, flamed. Garret stumbled back, hit his chair, pivoted and crashed into the wall where he slid to the floor, a bubbling, red trickle ruining his mother-of-pearl buttoned vest.

"The yella-backed cur!" cried Roswell, swinging his gun around. "Waal, Allison, git to it! This has been comin' fer years! Yore daddy before yuh, an' now you! Never could beat you! Always one up on me, the pair of yuh! Pull your iron!"

Allison stabbed a swift glance at Sieber. The latter was undecided. Suddenly he made up his mind, made a frantic dive for the door. But outside he ploughed into the arms of those who crowded anxiously around the door. He was stopped for good.

Allison thought of his father as he faced Roswell's leveled gun. He knew what his father would do. He knew what those outside expected him to do. He spoke evenly.

"You may bore me, Roswell, but I'm takin' yuh with me!"

He wasn't as swift as the Kid. Even his father would have been faster. But grimly and deliberately, he yanked his gun, threw it up. Threw it up as the blast of flame and lead spewed from the steady hand of Roswell.

Then he fired.

He stood rigid for the split second it took his carefully aimed slug to bash the life from Roswell. Then he wavered, swayed back and fell into the leather-backed chair. The chair his father had sat in with honor.

As Roswell's figure crashed to the floor, half a dozen townsmen poured in through the door. Faintly, Allison heard someone shout an order to get the doctor. Then another voice at his shoulder:

"Jes' like his pop. Never knew when to quit!"

A warm crawling feeling of satisfaction crept through Allison. His pain-clamped lips parted slowly, and he smiled. Then, later, from the darkness that was rushing forward to envelop him came the doctor's voice.

"Shore, he'll live, but he's gonna git a nice rest before election time."

DAKOTA DAVE RIDES TRAIL

A Trick Masquerade Can't Balk This Waddy When He Follows Sign on Bushwhacking Coyotes

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Showdown," "Two-Gun Waddy," etc.

"BUCK" LAKE wore an expression of satisfaction on his lean face as he glanced at the pile of money on the table in the ranch-house living room. He smiled at his younger brother as he leaned back in his chair.

"There it is, Dave," he said. "Two thousand dollars in cash for that herd of white-face Herefords. Never thought Wake Martin would really buy them critters, even though he told us that he would shore take 'em off our hands."

"Me neither." "Dakota Dave" Lake was two years younger than his brother, a wiry dark haired waddy who had just celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday. "I wouldn't trust Wake Martin any further than I could throw an elephant."

"And yuh ain't never even seen an elephant in the flesh!" Buck laughed. He drew a shining silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it idly in the air. "Reckon we better decide which one of us is gonna take this *dinero* into town and put it in the bank."

"I'll go!" Dave exclaimed eagerly, rising from his chair and starting to pick up the money. "Startin' right now!"

"Hold yore hosses!" said the older brother. "Yuh *would* pick the easy job first off. Don't forget there ain't but the two of us on this spread, and what with all the rustlin' that's been goin' on around this part of the country, one of us has to take care of things around here."

"That's right," Dakota Dave nodded. "What with them five wild hosses we jest caught and have out in the corral with the rest of the cavvy, we can't afford to take no chances. Our stock is valuable."

"Right. So we'll toss a coin, like always, to see who goes and who stays here." Buck flung the silver dollar up into the air. "You call it, Dave."

"Head's I go to town," Dakota Dave said quickly.

The silver dollar dropped to the floor and disappeared. Buck leaped to his feet and began frantically searching for the coin. Dave watched him with a smile of amusement. He knew how much his brother valued that silver dollar. It was Buck's lucky piece. He had carried it for years, for the coin bore the same date as that of his birth back in Dakota, where the brothers had both been born and raised —and were proud of it. And Buck believed that date on the coin made it a most fortunate bit of money.

"Found it!" Buck cried finally. "And it's tails! I go to town with the money."

The frightened horse galloped toward the corral, dragging a limp figure

"Go ahead," Dave said languidly. "I ain't arguin' about it none. It's kinda hot this mornin' anyway." He laughed. "And I don't have to do a thing but jest sit in the shade and watch the hosses."

"Un-huh," said Buck as he picked up the money, rolled it up and placed it in a pocket of his levis, glad that Martin had given him bills of large denomination. "If I didn't know yuh so well I'd think yuh was lazy. But since I do, I'm shore of it."

Dave gave him a playful punch in the ribs and went out to watch as his older brother roped and saddled a horse and rode quickly away toward the little cowtown five miles to the southwest.

BUCK had hardly disappeared into the distance before Dakota Dave Lake found himself growing restless. He began to wonder if Buck had not been a little reckless in riding to town alone while carrying all that money. After all there was a chance of his being held up and robbed, or even drygulched.

"Wish I'd gone with him," muttered Dave. For a few moments he hesitated, then made up his mind. "Reckon I'll ride after him." He roped and saddled his favorite mount, then carefully barred the corral gate. "Ain't any danger of them rustlers stealin' the cavvy in broad daylight. I guess it will be all right to leave the hosses alone."

Ten miles later he was galloping the road that led to town. At any moment he expected to discover Buck riding ahead of him, but when he had covered the next three miles he saw no sign of his brother.

When only two miles of straight road separated him from the town he saw a rider on a bay horse far in the distance.

"That's Buck," Dave muttered as he reined his mount. "I'd recognize his hoss anywhere," he frowned. "Looks like he made it safe. Reckon I'd better be getting back to the ranch before he gives me hell for leavin' the cavvy."

He whirled his horse and galloped back along the road in the direction from which he had come. He was within half a mile of the ranch when a rifle roared somewhere in a thicket to his left. A bullet whistled by his head. Uttering a startled curse he flung himself low in the saddle as he urged his horse to greater speed.

There was no doubt in Dakota Dave Lake's mind that somebody was trying to drygulch him, and he knew that the six-gun in the holster on his right hip was no match for that rifle at long range. His one idea was to get away from there in a hurry.

Again there came the whiplike crack of the Winchester. Dave's horse stumbled, then fell as the bullet caught him. It happened so suddenly that the waddy found himself flying through the air. He landed in some brush and hard ground at the side of the road with a thud that shook him from head to foot.

For a moment he sprawled there dazed. Then, looking very much like a man imitating a lizard, he crawled hastily into the shelter of some rocks. He had not forgotten the dry-gulcher with the rifle.

"That hombre's shore playin' for keeps," Dave muttered as he discovered that he was more shaken than hurt. "Wonder why he's so anxious to down me?"

It was a question he could not answer. For what seemed hours he waited, crouching behind the rock, with his Colt in his hand, but there was no further sign of activity upon the part of the drygulcher.

There was nothing to be seen save the broad expanse of rugged country and Dakota Dave Lake's dead horse sprawled out on the road. Then suddenly the waddy caught a glimpse of a horseman topping a rise to the northward. The rider was too far away for identification, though he looked as if he were a big man and he was carrying a rifle in his hand and riding a pinto horse.

"That looks like the jasper that was tryin' to get me," Dave told himself tightly as he watched the horseman disappear into the distance. "Wonder why he didn't finish the job?"

IT dawned on him then that the drygulcher might have been left on guard in order to stop anyone coming along the road from reaching the Lake brothers Flying L spread. In that case the drygulcher might have been one of a gang of rustlers, left behind to watch while the rest of the outlaws raided the spread.

"And that would mean they've stolen the cavvy!" Dave thought anxiously. "I better head for home!"

He thrust his gun into the holster and started along the road, moving awkwardly in his high-heeled boots. But he finally negotiated the half mile that separated him from the ranch, and as he approached he saw that he had been right. The gate of the corral was standing wide open and it was empty. Every horse that had been there was gone!

"Buck was right." Dakota Dave frowned, a feeling of guilt stealing over him. "I should have stayed right here on the spread," he thought mournfully. "Buck's gonna be plenty riled when he gets back and finds out

(Continued on page 118)

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(Continued from page 116)
what's happened."

Well, there was nothing that he could do now save await the return of his brother, he mused with a deep sigh. The rustlers had not left one horse on the spread, and it would be futile for him, Dakota Dave, to make any attempt to trail them on foot. He would just have to stay where he was until Buck got back.

He wandered back toward the ranchhouse, and as it was about noon he started for the kitchen to get something to eat ready for Buck and himself. They would need food before they started out after the rustlers.

He had just reached the kitchen door when he heard the hoofbeats of a swiftly moving horse approaching. Buck was returning! He ran back around the house to meet him.

As he rounded the corner of the house a wave of horror swept over Dakota Dave Lake. His brother Buck had returned, but not in the way either of them had expected. Toward the corral galloped the frightened bay horse, dragging a limp, dust-covered figure whose boot had been caught in one stirrup.

Leaping swiftly for the horse Dave grabbed it by the bridle rein. He managed to halt the bay, then stood on the off side of the horse gazing at the battered corpse that had been his brother.

Buck's left leg was still hanging from the stirrup. There were tears in Dakota Dave's eyes, but his young face was like granite as he drew out a clasp knife and cut the stirrup leather so that it dropped off the saddle. This done he led the bay into the corral, unsaddled him, and carefully closed the gate.

Dave's eyes narrowed as he saw four riders approaching the spread. He waited until they rode closer, his hand close to the gun on his hip as he stood not far from the body of his brother.

In moments more Wake Martin and four of his waddies appeared. There was a scowl on the thin face of the middle-aged ranch owner, one so black that it was obvious that Martin was angry about something.

"WHAT'S the idea, Lake?" Martin demanded. "You and yore brother tryin' to run a whizzer on me? I paid yuh two thousand in cash for that herd of Herefords jest this mornin'—and now they're missing!" Suddenly the eyes of the owner of the Leaning M swiveled around and he saw the dust-covered figure on the ground. "Good Gawd, is that Buck?"

"Yes, that's what's left of him." Dave's voice was harsh and unnatural. "He—he's dead."

"Too bad," said Martin. "Got hung up in his stirrup looks like, and the hoss dragged him."

"His foot was caught in the stirrup all right," Dakota Dave said slowly, "and his hoss must have dragged him a long ways."

"Mebbe you and Buck got a little careless when yuh were stealin' back that herd yuh sold me," snapped Wake Martin.

"That's a dirty lie!" Dakota Dave Lake's eyes were hard and his hand was on the butt of his gun. "We ain't seen them white-face critters since we turned 'em over to yore outfit this mornin' and yuh give Buck the money for the herd."

"Never mind the hard talk," said Martin. "Either I get that herd back or you return that two thousand I paid for 'em—and I'm givin' yuh till tomorrow mornin' to decide which it's gonna be."

Dave Lake noticed then that a sixth man was riding toward Martin and the four Leaning M waddies. Jim watched the newcomer's arrival with interest, for he was different from Martin and his crew. The stranger was lean and thin, and had two guns in his holsters. His clothing was covered with dust as though he had rid-

den long and far. There was a hardness about him that gave the impression that he might have been hewed out of gray stone.

The Leaning M waddies glanced askance at him as he reined his bay horse beside the group and silently nodded.

"What do you want, Turner?" demanded Martin.

"Jest curious," drawled Turner. "Yuh mind?"

"None of my business if yuh want to hang around here." Martin glared at Dakota Dave Lake. "Remember what I said, Lake. I'm givin' yuh until mornin'—that's all." He swung his horse around. "Come on, boys, let's get ridin'."

Without further words the men of the Leaning M outfit galloped away. The thin gray rider sat motionless, looking thoughtfully at Dakota Dave.

"Well?" Dave glared at the horseman. "What do yuh want?"

"Sorry." Turner nodded toward the corpse of Buck Lake. "Figgered yuh might like help buryin' him." The thin man slid out of the saddle, ground-hitching his horse. "From the marks in the dirt looks like the hoss was draggin' him on the off side—and his right foot was caught in the stirrup?"

"Jest so," Dave nodded. "You working for Martin?"

"Yuh ever seen a wolf runnin' with coyotes?"

"Oh! Not hardly." Dave studied Turner more intently and could not come to any definite decision regarding him. Despite this man's hardness, there was something friendly about him, and at the moment Dakota Dave felt much alone and in need of a friend. "That's my brother Buck. Me and him sold Martin a herd of whiteface Herefords this mornin'. Martin paid us cash. About two hours ago Buck started for town to put the money in the bank."

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"HE never got there," Turner said quietly. "I been in town—and I've got a way of noticin' people. Somebody pointed you and yore brother out to me when yuh was in town yesterday gettin' supplies."

"Then the money must still be on him," said Dakota. "I never thought to look. He knelt down beside his brother and forced himself to go through Buck's clothing. All of the dead man's pockets were empty, but that was not surprising after his having been dragged by his horse as he had been. "Nothin' here." Dave stood up.

"Figgered so," Turner nodded.

Some impulse made Dakota Dave tell him the rest of his story, how he had been left to guard the cavvy, had grown anxious regarding Buck's safety, and had followed him halfway to town.

"Saw a rider on a bay hoss in the distance, so I figgered that Buck had made it safely," Dave explained. "But I was shore wrong!"

"What time was that?"

"Right close to noon," answered Dave.

"Reckon I was the hombre that yuh saw ridin' a bay," Turner said. "I was headin' back to town about then. Started to ride out to Martin's spread and then changed my mind."

Dakota Dave then told Turner of the drygulcher killing his horse and of his having to walk the rest of the way to the ranch; and of his finding the horses missing when he arrived.

"I jest rode out here from town," said Turner. "Nary a sign of a dead hoss on the road now."

"That's funny!" Dave frowned as he looked at the other man. "I wonder what happened to that hoss?"

"Mebbe we better bury yore brother and go find out," suggested Turner.

Half an hour later Buck Lake had been buried on a hill not far from the little ranch that he had loved, and Dakota Dave Lake and the man called Turner were riding along the road to town. Dave was mounted on his brother's horse, and he had placed a fresh saddle on the big bay.

"Here's the place where the drygulcher got my hoss," he said as he recognized the spot. They got from their mounts to size up the place for signs.

"Looks like a couple of riders roped that hoss and dragged him out of sight," remarked Turner. "Then they run a tree branch or something over the trail so's it wouldn't be noticed." He drew a red bandanna from his pocket and mopped his face with it. "Shore is hot this afternoon."

And it was at that moment that from a cluster of boulders to their left there came the crack of a rifle. Turner uttered a startled oath as a bullet tore through the peak of his Stetson.

"Damn fool!" he muttered. "Shootin'—" He broke off abruptly and jumped for a place of safety as a second bullet whined above his head.

Dakota Dave had already stepped behind his big bay horse, and was calmly drawing a Winchester out of a saddle sheath. This time he was riding fully armed.

He fired as he caught a glimpse of something moving in the brush. His aim was far more accurate that he had dared hope. A man leaped into view, threw his hands up over his head, then sprawled face downward in the brush.

"YUH got him!" There was surprise in Turner's tone. "That was shore good shootin'."

"Now why was that hombre tryin' to drygulch us?" said Dave thoughtfully. "It jest don't make sense." He placed the rifle back in the saddle sheath and looked at Turner. "Suppose we ride over there and take a good look at that hombre."

"All right." Turner swung into the saddle as Dakota Dave, too, mounted and they rode to the dead man. Tur-

ner dismounted again and turned the corpse over so that Dave could see the face. "Recognize him?"

"Nope." The man was a total stranger. Dave Lake had never seen him before. "Never set eyes on the gent up to now."

"Riders comin'!" Turner said abruptly, as he glanced back along the road. "Looks like the sheriff and a posse." He leaped on his horse and put spurs to him. "Be seein' yuh later. Figger we'll get along better if the law don't know I'm working with yuh."

Dakota Dave sat watching, a thoughtful frown on his face as the thin man galloped away, to disappear into a wooded section not far from the road.

In a few moments, Sheriff Water and his posse had reached the spot where Dave was waiting a short distance back from the road. They uttered a shout and swung their mounts toward him.

"All right, Lake," said the sheriff as he reined his mount and suddenly covered Dakota Dave with his gun. "Looks like we got yuh with less trouble than I figgered on. I'm arresting yuh on a charge of rustlin' and gettin' money under false pretenses!"

"Yuh're crazy, Sheriff!" protested Lake. "I ain't done either one. And if Martin says so he's a liar!"

"Funny yuh'd know that it was Martin that made them charges against yuh," said the sheriff. He looked at the dead man. "And I'm afraid I'm gonna have to add murder to the rest of it. Yuh killed this hombre, didn't yuh, Lake?"

"Shore I killed him," said Lake. "That jasper was tryin' to drygulch me, so I let him have a bullet from my rifle right sudden-like."

"And I suppose yuh're gonna claim that yuh didn't know this hombre was a deputy marshal workin' under cover to round up the rustlers?" demanded the sheriff.

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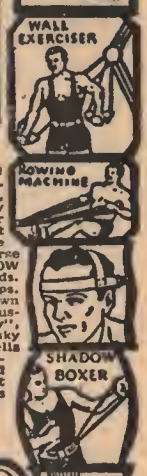

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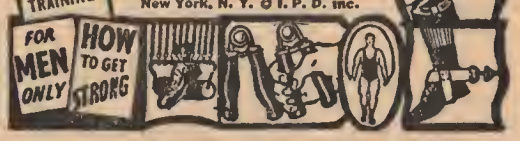

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(Continued from page 121)

Dakota Dave merely stood gazing at the middle-aged lawman. The young waddy's mouth was hanging open with amazement.

"No," he said finally. "I didn't know that."

Abruptly he jabbed his spurs into the bay. The big horse leaped forward, bumping into the sheriff's mount with such unexpected force that the gun was jarred out of the lawman's hand. Before the posse quite realized what had happened Dakota Dave swept by them—and in a moment the bay was going at a full gallop.

Lake ducked low in the saddle as guns roared behind him and bullets whistled dangerously close. But he was moving fast and increasing the distance between himself and the sheriff's posse with every jackrabbit-like leap of the big bay.

He galloped across the road and back into a stretch of rocky country. Behind him the posse had started in pursuit, but he vanished from view before they were able to get any too close on his trail.

HOUR after hour he continued riding back into the mountains. There was only one thought in his mind now, and that was to get as far away as possible. He knew that he was not guilty of any of the crimes of which he had been accused, but there was little chance of convincing the angry men who rode after him of that fact.

Dusk gave way to night and Dakota Dave Lake finally slowed his tired horse, feeling that he was safe for the time being at least. There were many things that puzzled him as he thought back over the events of the day.

Why had Wake Martin told him that he would give him until morning to clear himself of having stolen the Herefords with Buck's aid, and to return the money if not the steers? Why had Martin done that and then sent the sheriff and a posse after him? What had made the ranch owner change his mind so quickly? They were questions that Lake could not answer—and yet he felt that if he knew that answer he would have the solution to the whole mess in which he found himself.

Suddenly he reined his horse as he caught a faint glimmer of flickering light ahead of him. It appeared to be a campfire blazing in the distance. Lake slid out of the saddle, tying the bay to a tree back out of sight in a clump of woods.

Cautiously he advanced toward the light. He found that he had been right. It was the glow of a campfire that he had seen. A group of hard-looking men were gathered about it, their faces evil in the eerie, flickering light.

"The rustlers!" Lake muttered under his breath. "So this is their hideout."

He circled around and in a rope corral he discovered the horses that had been stolen from his spread. Back further he discovered a herd of white-face Herefords in a blind canyon.

He crept closer to the men around the fire—and crouched down in the darkness near enough to hear their voices.

"About time for the boss to show up," one of the men was saying. "That trick we pulled with them Herefords shore was a good one. But the law ain't gonna figure that out in a hurry."

"Yuh talk too much, Slash." A tall man had appeared in the firelight, his head completely concealed by a black hood.

"Sorry, Wake!" the man called "Slash" said hastily.

"Don't call me that!" the leader snapped impatiently. "Don't yuh know that there are times when yuh're not to use that name?"

"Shore, Boss," said Slash. "I jest forgot."

"Well don't let it happen again!"

Dakota Dave moved silently away. He had heard enough. There was just one more thing that he was anxious to learn, and to make sure of that he made his way to the rope cavvy corral. He examined the horses as best he could in the darkness, and finally found one that was still warm and sweat-stained as though it had just been ridden.

"Thought so," Lake muttered softly. "Jest what I figured."

He drew out his clasp-knife and slashed the ropes that formed the corral in several places, then faded away into the darkness before the horses realized that they had a chance for freedom. While there was a chance of the wild horses running away, he was sure that most of the regular Flying L stock would return to their home corral.

HALF an hour later he was riding back out of the mountains. He was anxious to meet the sheriff and the posse now, for if he did he intended to lead them to the hideout of the rustlers.

But apparently Sheriff Water and his men had given up the chase, for Lake found no sign of them. He rode to his own spread and placed his tired horse in the corral. Then he went into the house and slept for two hours.

He was awakened by the thumping of hoofs outside. He ran out and discovered that he had been right. His horses had returned to the home corral and the wild ones had traveled along with the rest.

"Got them hombres now!" he exclaimed. "They ain't gonna be able to get far without any hosses."

Hastily he saddled a fresh horse and rode to town. Here he found that the sheriff and the posse had returned after having abandoned their search for him for the night. . . .

It took quite a bit of talking on Da-

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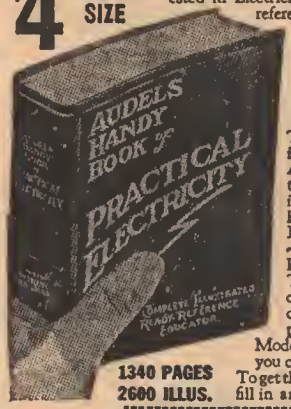

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(Continued from page 123)

kota Dave Lake's part before he finally convinced the lawman and a hastily formed posse that he would lead them to the outlaw hideout in order to clear himself. But he did at last, and through the night they rode, a band of grim-faced men with Lake in the lead. On back into the mountains they went, getting closer and closer to the hideout of the outlaws.

Then suddenly guns were blazing. Flames lanced the night, and the air was filled with a sullen roar as rustlers and posse fought their grim battle.

Dakota Dave Lake was in the thick of the fight. He fired as he saw a rustler aim at the sheriff, when the lawman and outlaw were revealed in the red glow of the blaze that was still burning. The outlaw dropped, with a bullet in his head.

But always Lake was seeking just one man, the leader of the band who wore the hood that concealed his head; seeking and not finding him. He was sure that this man had managed to make his escape.

For what seemed hours the battle raged, but at last it was over, and the posse had won. Most of the rustlers were dead, and the rest had been taken prisoner.

"Nice work, son," said the sheriff as he sought out Dakota Dave. "Don't look like there's any reason for us to believe yuh guilty any longer. But I'm still sorry you downed that deputy marshal."

"Figger on clearin' that up for yuh, too, Sheriff," said Dave as he rode away.

With the coming of morning Wake Martin and four of his men again appeared at the Flying L spread. The owner of the Leaning M was still aggressive.

"Told yuh I'd give yuh until mornin' to return the money or bring back that herd of Herefords, Lake," Martin said.

"Yuh musta been sleepin' awful sound last night, Martin," Dakota Dave drawled. "Sheriff and a posse found the rustlers hideout—cleaned up on the whole bunch of 'em—and found them Herefords there, too."

"What!" There was an expression of startled surprise on Martin's face. "Yuh mean that, Lake?"

"Shore do!"

"Then where are them whitefaces?"

"Reckon yuh'll find 'em in town," said Lake. "The sheriff is holdin' 'em as evidence against the rustlers."

"Then I'm headin' into town to get my herd back," said Martin.

"Good idea." Dakota Dave smiled at the owner of the Leaning M. The sheriff is lookin' for a masked hombre that the rustlers called 'Wake.' He was their leader."

FOR an instant it looked as though Martin was going to go for his

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

gun. Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders as he rode away with his men following him.

It was afternoon when Dave Lake rode into the little cowtown and entered the Glad Hand Saloon. He smiled when he saw that Sheriff Water, Wake Martin and the thin man, Turner, were all at the bar.

"Hola, gents," said Lake as he ordered a drink. "Shore am glad to see it is so peaceful around here once more."

"Thanks to you," said the sheriff.

"Nice goin' hombre," said Turner. He yawned. "Guess I'll be ridin'." He looked at the sheriff. "Reckon there's enough law around here without me stayin'."

"Turner is a deputy marshal," said Water. "He was the partner of that marshal yuh shot, Lake."

"Sorry about that," Lake said casually.

Turner tossed a silver dollar carelessly on the bar. The barkeep picked it up, then looked at it intently.

"Hey," he said. "This dollar ain't no good. It's got a hole in it."

"What's the date on it?" Dakota Dave asked casually.

The barkeep mentioned Buck Lake's birth date.

"That's all I wanted to know." Abruptly Lake's gun was in his hand and he was covering Turner. "This man is the leader of yore outlaws, Sheriff!" he spat out.

"Why, yuh—"

Turner tried to make a quick draw, but Lake's gun roared and the thin man howled with pain as the bullet caught him in the arm.

"This man is no more a deputy marshal than I am," Dakota Dave snapped shortly. "And neither was his dry-gulchin' partner. Turner has had yuh all fooled—but not me. In the first place my brother was killed by somebody stickin' his foot through the stirrup and letting his hoss drag him.

(Concluded on page 126)

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(Concluded from page 125)

. . . Which side of a cow pony is the off side, Sheriff?"

"Why, the right," said the sheriff. "A waddy mounts from the left."

"All right," said Lake. "Buck's right foot was caught in the stirrup and he was bein' dragged on the right side of the hoss. He couldn't a slipped out of the saddle that away unless he was ridin' backwards. Turner knew this, and talked like he seen the signs from where the hoss had dragged Buck. The ground was too hard for there to be any signs."

"Go on," Sheriff Water said, covering Turner with his gun. "What else?"

"Turner robbed Buck, of course!" Lake furiously accused. "Reckon he had already done it and had knocked Buck out when I seen Turner ridin' toward town and thought he was my brother. Meanwhile Turner's partner tries to drygulch me—so's to give the rest of the rustlers a chance to steal my cavvy. Turner comes to my spread after Martin gets there and makes like he's my friend. He wanted to get me interested enough in findin' out why my dead hoss had been moved so's we would ride back out on the road."

"WHAT for?" asked the sheriff.

"So Turner's partner could kill me. It would never do for Turner to do it. He had been seen at my spread by Martin and his outfit so they might suspect him. Turner signals his partner to start firin' by wiping his face with a handkerchief. The partner makes it look too real and shoots a hole in Turner's hat. Turner calls him a fool before he thinks—then I down the partner. Turner decides to hightail it when the posse shows up—and the rest of it yuh know, Sheriff. Except that Turner was smart enough to have his men call him 'Wake,' even when they was home—so's Martin would be suspected in case there was any accidental eavesdroppers."

"All except one thing," said the sheriff. "What made yuh so shore of Turner here and now?"

"'Cause Turner was fool enough to try and pay for his drinks with my brother's lucky dollar. Buck bored a hole in that coin a long time ago, so he wouldn't never spend it accidental-like." Dakota Dave sighed. "Would yuh mind searchin' Turner? I would like my two thousand dollars."

Sheriff Water did so quickly, and Lake breathed a sigh of relief as the lawman found the money.

"Thanks," said Dakota Dave. He turned to the barkeep. "Yuh mind lettin' me have that silver dollar? I want it to remember my brother by."

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 106)

comprised more than a hundred thousand acres. He had a fine herd of cattle and some of the best horses in Texas. He was partial to palominos and his favorite mount, Creamy, was known and admired by thousands.

Champ Cowboys

Just a short time ago sports writers finished picking their All-American football teams, and since I am supposed to know as much about cowboy sports as those fellows know about football I thought I would try my hand at picking my All-American cowboy team. Or at least those who in my opinion are the champions in the various events that go to make up the sport.

In doing this I would like to point out that the Rodeo Association of America each year awards championship titles to those contestants who win the greatest number of points at the Association rodeos throughout the season.

The R.A.A. is a governing body under whose sanction more than a hundred rodeos are staged in the United States and Canada each season. It is a wonderful organization and has done much for the upbuilding of cowboy contests.

But each season there are nearly as many rodeos staged that do not belong to the association as there is that do belong. As points toward the championship can only be won at Association contests, a fellow who does not contest at association rodeos almost exclusively, or who perhaps stays on the ranch and gets a late start in the spring or summer has very little chance to win the Association title.

I think however that this is as it should be. It has a tendency to cause more rodeos to join the association and the contestants to give preference to those contests that are staged by the Association.

The R.A.A. season's championship titles carry with them nice cash prizes which, added to the honor, makes them something to strive for and to be proud of. So in picking my All-American champion rodeo team, if my selections do not coincide with the opinions of the R.A.A. in selecting point winners I hope that it will not be construed to mean that I would take away any of the honor or prestige of the Association champions. It simply is that I would like to place a little honor and prestige with some cowboys who can use it.

Close Contests

First we will take the title of champion all-around cowboy, meaning the best in several events. Burel Mulkey, of Salmon, Idaho, won the Association title by nosing out Everett Bowman of Hillside, Arizona, by

(Continued on page 128)

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AT ALL STANDS

(Continued from page 127)

less than a hundred points in a total of more than eight thousand.

Paul Carney, of Galeton, Colorado, was leading the field up to near the finish when injuries forced him out of the finish. Bowman was the defending champion and in my estimation it's a toss-up between the three of them. I don't think that either of them really knows which is best.

Mulkey also won the title as champion bronc rider, and I believe the title really belongs to him. But Nick Knight, of Cody, Wyoming, and Paul Carney are so very, very close to him that it is hard to see the difference. With just a little more attention to ring generalship Eddie Curtis of El Reno, Oklahoma, will be right up with the other three.

Everett Bowman won the title of champion steer wrestler, and he is plenty good. But my pick for the best steer wrestler in America today is Howard McCrory, of Deadwood, South Dakota. Gene Ross, of Sayre, Oklahoma, is one of the fastest steer wrestlers known but every so often is given to fumble one, which seems to be the only thing that keeps him from the very pinnacle of the steer-tossing art.

Big Season Ahead

The R.A.A. champion calf roper is Clyde Burk, of Comanche, Oklahoma, and this is just right. Clyde is lightning fast and accurate. Next to him I would pick Jess Goodspeed, of Okemah, Oklahoma, while perhaps just a second slower than these two, a roper who seldom misses, and one who has won more calf-roping money in the past fifteen years than any other contestant is Jake McClure of Lovington, New Mexico.

The Association champion bareback bronc rider is Pete Grubb, of Blackfoot, Idaho. But my vote goes to Paul Carney in this event, with Pete, second and Eddie Curtis, third.

"Kid" Fletcher, of Hugo, Colorado, won the most points in steer or bull riding at the Association rodeos during 1938, and was awarded the title of champion of this event. In a matched contest between him and Ken Roberts, of Strong City, Kansas, though, I believe Roberts would be the winner. However, Fletcher is a wonderful rider and although comparatively small and light has plenty of endurance and riding ability.

There will be plenty of activity for rodeo contestants during the season of 1939 now getting under way with the rodeo at Phoenix, Arizona, February 9th to 12th. Tucson will hold its annual mid-winter rodeo, February 23rd to 26th, and there will be three big spring rodeos in Texas, each staged in conjunction with fat stock shows. Those bring in the cowboys, the cattlemen, and fine, fat cattle and each will be the annual Western gala event of their section of the state. They are held in Houston, February 25th to March 5th; San Angelo, March 3rd to 6th; and Fort Worth, March 10th to 19th.

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS *IN*

Thrills for Australia

Quite a number of American cowboys and cowgirls will spend the spring months in Australia. The principal rodeo in that country will be staged in Sydney. Among those going over are Jerry Ambler, Jack Wade, Jack Sherman, Alvin Gordon, Bill McMackin, Shorty Creed, Doris Haynes, Iva Dell Jacobs, Alice Greenough and "Jazbo" Fulkerson, all good hands with plenty of rodeo experience and capable of giving the Australians a full measure of thrills in Western sport.

Early in December the Paramount Picture Corporation shot a number of scenes in the Wichita Mountain Forest and Game Preserve just North of Craterville Park, Oklahoma. The scenes which are to be a part of the new picture, "Union Pacific," will show some of the wonderful scenery of that section and the game preserve herd of buffalo.

A number of local cowboys were used in the scenes, among them Charlie Patterson and Frank Rush, Jr. It must have been a great pleasure to young Rush to work with that herd of buffalo because his dad, the late Frank Rush, Sr., was in the government forest service as supervisor of the forest and game preserve from 1907 to 1923. It was he who procured and shipped in the foundation of the present herd.

One would never guess where Frank Rush, Sr. obtained that first small herd of fifteen buffalo. They did not come from the wide open spaces of the West, but from the New York Zoological Garden, although it was more than a quarter of a century ago.

Among the herd of buffalo which will be shown in the picture will be one that will make you think, "Haven't we met before?" Right! You have seen his likeness many, many times. He was on the buffalo nickel turned out of Uncle Sam's mints for many years, until just last year. He is old now, but still a proud, majestic animal befitting one whose ancestors were once kings of the plains.

FOG HORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

Well, folks, Fog Horn Clancy's run on so I just have this little space in which to tell yuh about th' next issue. Th' featured novel will be WINCHESTER WAR, by Oscar J. Friend—which yuh know was previously announced, but postponed. However, this yarn of a barb wire barricade that creates range war as cattle mysteriously die from strange disease—well, it's shore worth waitin' for. And it will be in the next issue, along with other yarns by writin' pards like Bert A. Sandborgh, who'll be on hand with a swell rodeo story.

Thanks tuh all yuh folks who have written in such swell letters—and keep them coming. Let's have all yore comments on Fog Horn Clancy's spiel, won't yuh? Thanks.

—THE EDITOR.

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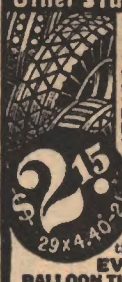

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-19	2.90	1.35
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If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada
If you reside in England, send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England

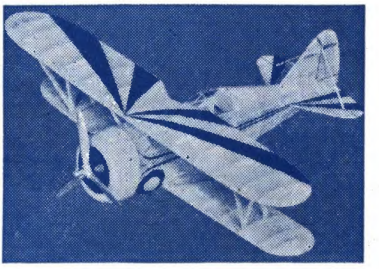
Boys, Make Money and Earn from our Big Prize Book

ANYTHING YOU WANT

WOW! Three hundred prizes for boys. Earn anything you want—including the de luxe streamlined Silver King aluminum bike shown at the left. Comes to you fully equipped with blast hornlite, coaster brake, platform carrier, rear-wheel stand, balloon tires. Has lock built in the steering fork. Sturdy bow-arch double-bar frame, built low.

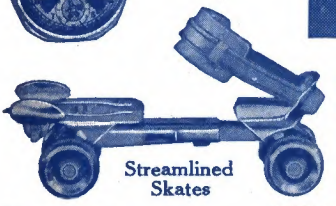
Earn this bike, a coaster wagon, typewriter, movie machine or anything else you want. Make MONEY, too. It's easy! It's fun! Just deliver The American Magazine, Woman's Home Companion and Collier's to customers whom you obtain in your neighborhood. Do it in spare time. Many boys earn a prize the first day. So can you. Mail coupon *today* to start. State age.

Pilot your own model plane. The Grumann Gulfhawk shown at the right is a daisy. Look at that 3-bladed prop; notice the markings on the fuselage and the retractable landing gear. Earn it! Mail the coupon to start.



Popeye Watch

One of the swellest watches you've ever seen. It can be YOURS!



Streamlined Skates

When you begin rolling on these *streamlined* Globe skates you'll think you're on a bolt of greased lightning. You can earn them, any of 300 other big prizes, and make MONEY, too. Mail the coupon to start. Be the first boy in your neighborhood to get going.

Look at that 200-power microscope shown at the right! And a telescope, steam engine, wagon and a "Joe DiMaggio" baseball glove! Earn anything you want—or the whole lot! Make money at the same time. If you're not a boy between 12 and 15, show this offer to someone who is. Do it *now!*

Mail the Coupon to Start

Think of the fun you'll have—with all the prizes you want and your pockets full of spending money. It's easy for the ambitious boy. Some fellows earn a prize the first day. Get in the fun NOW and earn money and prizes for months to come. Mail the coupon to start. Be sure to give your age.

300 Big Prizes to Choose From!

Earn These Prizes

Mr. Jim Thayer, Dept. 865
The Crowell Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio

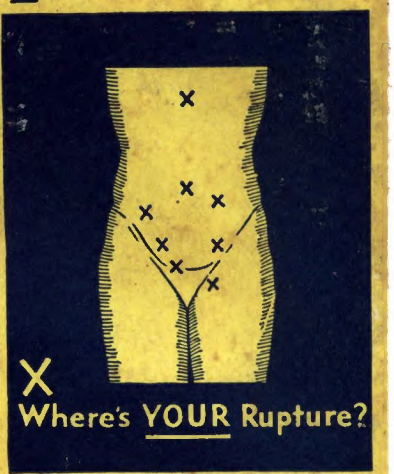
Dear Jim: I want to make MONEY and earn a flock of PRIZES. Start me at once and rush me one of your beautiful 32-page Prize Books.

Name_____ Age_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

don't Worry about Rupture



● Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear? Learn now about this perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire—you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy life's normal activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting Fear of Rupture banished from your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of rupture sufferers have entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained.* Why not you? Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where others fail is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless, *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Nature a Chance to Close the OPENING

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that permits Nature to close the opening—that holds the rupture securely but gently, day and night, at work and at play! Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for results beyond the expectation of the writers. What is this invention—How does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Automatic Air Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap–Sanitary–Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The Perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It brings heavenly comfort and security—while the Automatic Air Cushion continually works, in its own, unique way *to help Nature get results!* Learn what this patented invention can mean to you—send coupon quick!

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 33,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Likes Brooks Best

"I bought one of your Rupture Appliances in 1933, wore it day and night for one year and laid it aside last December. The rupture hasn't bothered me since. I used several others without success until I got a Brooks."—J. B. McCarter, Route 2, Box 104, Oregon City, Ore.

"Runs and Plays"

"My son has not worn the Appliance for over a year. He wore one for ten years and I am very grateful now to think he has laid it aside. He is twelve years old, runs and plays hard like all boys and is never bothered about the rupture."—Mrs. M. George, Route 1, Box 103, Cumberland, Md.

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT ON TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want the comfort—the freedom from fear and worry—the security—the same amazing results thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found our invention the answer to their prayers! Why can't you? And you risk nothing as the complete Appliance is *sent on trial.* Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

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Without obligation, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.

Name.....

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State whether for ☐ Man, ☐ Woman, or ☐ Child.